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Figure 1: Iraqi women protesting in Baghdad during the 2019 Uprisings. Ivor Prickett, New York Times

“Everybody Hates Us”:
Iraqi Women Resisting Imperialism, Repression, and Extremism
(1990-Present)

Thomas Rice

Honors Thesis Submission: Oberlin College History Department

Advisor: Professor Zeinab Abul-Magd

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Map of Iraq



Figure 2: UN political map from 2014.

Introduction

The recent wave of uprisings began in Baghdad on October 1, 2019 to express discontent over the dismissal of a popular military officer who helped uproot the so-called “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” or ISIL.¹ Over the next few days, demonstrations took place in many of Iraq’s largest cities, where women and men called for higher wages, better public services, and an end to the corrupt government installed by the US after it invaded in 2003.² By October 10, Iraqi security forces had killed over one hundred protesters and injured well over four thousand, but the government made no other response.³ Iraqis went home and regrouped, but by late October the protests resumed, this time taking control of downtown Baghdad.⁴ Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi submitted his resignation a month later.⁵ There appeared to be a revolution in progress.

Ban, a 25 year-old from Baghdad, was among the many women shaping the movement. She told *Rudaw*, a news outlet based in Iraqi Kurdistan,

For the first time, I feel a sense of belonging to this country, the importance of my existence, and that the revolution needs all of us... For women, this revolution is not only against the government, but also against the tribal and religious systems that limit women’s role in society.⁶

¹ There are many names associated with this group, including its Arabic acronym, *Da‘esh*, and its most popular acronym, ISIS. To make this paper both as accurate and as accessible as possible, I have chosen to use ISIL because it is likely more familiar to my readers than “Daesh.” In addition, the translation “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,” which corresponds to ISIL, is more accurate than “Iraq and Syria,” which corresponds to ISIS. This is because the Arabic word “al-Shams” refers not to Syria the nation-state, but Syria as a region, or what we call the “Levant” in English.

² Zahra Ali, “Iraqis Demand a Country,” *Middle East Report* 292 no. 3 (Fall/Winter 2019), accessed January 4, 2020, <https://merip.org/2019/12/iraqis-demand-a-country/>.

³ “Iraq: Lethal Force Used Against Protesters,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 10, 2019, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/10/iraq-lethal-force-used-against-protesters>.

⁴ Z. Ali, “Iraqis.”

⁵ Alissa J. Rubin, “Iraq Prime Minister Pressed to Quit as Protests Clog Streets,” *New York Times*, October 30, 2019, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/30/world/middleeast/iraq-protests-prime-minister.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>; Alissa J. Rubin, “Iraqi Prime Minister Resigns in Deepening Political Crisis,” *New York Times*, November 30, 2019, accessed April 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/30/world/middleeast/adel-abdul-mahdi-resigns-iraq.html>.

⁶ “Nisā’ Saḥat Taḥrīr fī Baghdād yaksrun ḥājaz alkhūf wa yantifaḍun ‘alā alqiyyūd” *Rudaw*, November 11, 2019, accessed February 28, 2020, <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/131120191>.

Ban was born in the 1990s, when Iraq's economy began to collapse under the pressure of international sanctions imposed by the US. As a child, Ban's family may have struggled from a shortage of basic goods and services, like medicine and education, or food and clean water.⁷ Ban came of age in the 2000s as the US occupied Iraq, sending the nation into even worse economic conditions, installing a corrupt regime, and pushing the country towards civil war.⁸ Not long after the US withdrew from Iraq, Ban lived through a third major crisis. In 2014 ISIL rapidly expanded and took control of large parts of Iraqi territory through genocidal warfare.⁹ These decades of war and instability touched the lives of every Iraqi, and had gender-specific impacts on women, who were forced to find means of survival and resistance.

Between 1990 and 2019, the US, various repressive governments, and extremist militias subjected Iraqi women to extreme poverty, political marginalization, health crises, displacement, and other forms of violence. From 1990-2002, after destroying most of Iraq's civilian infrastructure during Operation Desert Storm, the US used its dominant position in the UN to subject Iraq to the most comprehensive set of sanctions the world had ever seen.¹⁰ In response, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein (r. 1979-2003) implemented policies that dismantled the welfare state, which women had previously relied on for jobs, healthcare, and legal protections.¹¹ In 2003 the US invaded Iraq, destroying more infrastructure, dismantling most of its governing institutions, and subjecting Iraqis to violent economic policies that accelerated Iraq's economic

⁷ Yasmin Husein al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq: The Gender Impact of International Sanctions*, (Lynne Rienner Publications, 2008), 2-7.

⁸ Zahra Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq: Between Nation-Building and Fragmentation*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 131.

⁹ Fawaz Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 1-4.

¹⁰ A-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 2-7.

¹¹ Zahra Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 118-9.

collapse.¹² By the 2010s, the corruption and incompetence of the US and new Iraqi political elite had created many of the conditions necessary for the rise of ISIL.¹³ This extremist group took women as sex slaves, killed men who refused to convert their distorted version of Islam, and occupied Iraqi territory for several years.¹⁴ Throughout these recurring crises, Iraqi women found ways to survive and resist the constant and ever-changing violence against them.

This thesis investigates Iraqi women's history since 1990. It argues that, in the past three decades, Iraqi women have not been silent victims of US imperialism, the repression of the Iraqi state, or ISIL's extremism. Instead, they have resisted these forms of violence with visible agency, deploying tools of economic survival, political activism, creative writing, and armed resistance. Iraqi society underwent dramatic changes in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, and in each decade Iraqi women faced violence specific to that period. This thesis argues that Iraqi women's resistance adapted to the changing circumstances of each decade, sometimes through slight shifts and other times by forging new means of resistance.

I seek to avoid essentializing Iraqi women through an intersectional analysis of their actions. While religion, ethnicity, class, location, and a myriad of other factors all affected the ways Iraqi women responded to the violence of US imperialism, state repression, and ISIL's extremism, it is possible to identify trends in their shared resistance. In chapters one and two, class divisions are the most visible intersections, with low-income women resisting through their survival, and middle-class women sharing their stories through writing or joining political organizations. In chapter three, ethnicity, religion, and location are the most prominent intersections because ISIL targeted religious minorities and did not control the entirety of Iraq. In

¹² Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 293-304; Zahra Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 135.

¹³ Gerges, *ISIS*, 99-106; 109-14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30-33.

this case women living under ISIL finding ways to escape, and Kurdish women volunteering to fight ISIL on the front lines.

Literature Review

The historiography of women in the modern Iraqi nation-state advances post-colonial analyses that contextualize Iraqi women's experiences across time and space. It investigates the legacy of British imperialism, the construction and collapse of the welfare state under Saddam Hussein, the rise of political Islams,¹⁵ and argues for the existence of a unique Iraqi politics.¹⁶ Historians of Iraqi women typically begin during the British mandate period of 1920-32, when the British legal code made Iraqi women second-class citizens.¹⁷ Then they move to the British-installed Hashemite Monarchy of 1932-58, during which the modern Iraqi women's rights movement materialized.¹⁸ Under the first post-colonial republic of 1958-68, major reforms were made in Iraq, especially in regards to women's rights, and historians tend to examine the role women played in politics during this period.¹⁹ This historical context is certainly important to scholarly analysis Iraqi women in more recent years, but a deeper discussion of the Iraqi women's rights movement is outside the scope of a thesis of this length. Therefore, I will begin my historiographical discussion in earnest with women under the Ba'th regime.

Historian Charles Tripp argues in *A History of Iraq* that the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein was characterized by violent repression on a scale previously unseen in Iraq. Saddam Hussein's rise to power began in 1968, when the Iraqi Ba'th Party took control of the

¹⁵ The inclusion of an "s" at the end of Islam acknowledges that this religion means different things to different people. Islam is not a monolith; Thus, I use its plural form. This will be true of many terms throughout this thesis.

¹⁶ Tripp, *Iraq*, 281; Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 17.

¹⁷ Noga Efrati, *Women in Iraq: Past Meets Present*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 20-7.

¹⁸ Ibid., 166; Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 56-60.

¹⁹ Nadjé al-Ali and Nicole Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 26-7.

government and his uncle, Hassan al-Bakr, was named president.²⁰ As noted by Tripp, the Ba‘th Party, originally from Syria, had been in Iraq since 1951. It was a pan-Arab group, which meant it promoted unity among the Arab-majority nation states that were created after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. It advocated for socialism, though not communism. It was a secular group, though not atheistic, meaning it sought to use socialist policies to address inequalities among both Sunni and Shi‘a Arabs.²¹ However, Tripp argues that, as Saddam Hussein consolidated power during the 1970s, the Ba‘th Party became no more than an instrument used to repress dissent and demand obedience.²²

In her sociological study *Women in Iraq*, Yasmin Husein al-Jawaheri argues that, in the 1970s and ‘80s, Saddam Hussein and his Arab-socialist Ba‘th Party constructed a welfare state that incorporated women into the economy.²³ Through revenue from the nationalized oil industry, it provided them with the region’s best education,²⁴ and workplace benefits like daycare and paid maternity leave. However, al-Jawaheri also argues that the regime’s inclusionary policies were directly tied to its economic situation, so they were always liable to change or disappear entirely.²⁵ Sociologist Zahra Ali, in her book *Women and Gender in Iraq*, builds on al-Jawaheri’s analysis. She argues that, during this same period, Saddam Hussein constructed a “neopatriarchal state” in which he was the fatherly leader.²⁶ Through the policies described by al-Jawaheri, he attempted to replace localized forms of governance and patriarchy. New laws and reforms diminished the power of feudal and tribal power structures, especially in rural areas.²⁷ I

²⁰ Tripp, *Iraq*, 186-88.

²¹ Tripp, *Iraq*, 138.

²² Ibid., 190-91.

²³ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 16-7; 28-9.

²⁴ Tripp, *Iraq*, 200-7 (this citation only in reference to the claim that Iraq offered the region’s best education).

²⁵ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 16-7; 28-9.

²⁶ Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 118.

²⁷ Ibid., 90-96.

agree with these authors, and will use this important historical background to investigate the transformations that took place in Iraq during the '90s, specifically the collapse of the welfare state and policies that re-distributed power back to tribal and religious leaders.

In her book *Iraq in Wartime*, Dina Khoury discusses the lasting impacts of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). Khoury asserts that the Iraqi state and society were militarized by this prolonged war, and that they remain militarized to this day. She argues that the present situation in Iraq must be understood in the context of the Iran-Iraq war, and the subsequent 1991 uprisings against the Ba'th regime, because they had lasting impacts on Iraqi society and gender relations.²⁸ Khoury shows that, during the '80s, the Ba'th regime began to emphasize the masculine Iraqi soldier as its ideal citizen. However, many soldiers participated in the 1991 Uprising which followed Operation Desert Storm, so the Ba'th regime shifted its discourse, constructing a version of masculinity based on agricultural work and tribal allegiance.²⁹ In this thesis I will show how militarization and tribal masculinities threatened, and took, Iraqi women's rights and lives

Besides her historical insights into Iraqi women and the state in the 1970s-80s, al-Jawaheri investigates in depth the years of US sanctions and occupation. Her book, *Women in Iraq*, is a sociological and economic study conducted in the late 90s and early 2000s through questionnaires and interviews. In her analysis, Al-Jawaheri argues that UN sanctions had the effect of limiting women's role in society. Without revenue oil sales, the government was unable to rebuild civilian infrastructure after Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Iraq's schools deteriorated to the point that many women were encouraged, or forced, to stay home.³⁰ In

²⁸ Dina Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013),

²⁹ Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime*, 11-12.

³⁰ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 77.

addition, the state's shrinking role as an employer made it difficult for Iraqi women to find socially acceptable and safe jobs. Al-Jawaheri argues that this resulted in many women becoming impoverished, and increasingly dependent on the men in their lives.³¹ I agree with al-Jawaheri's conclusions, and I intend to expand on them by offering an account of the ways Iraqi women responded to and resisted these devastating social and economic changes.

Political scientist Nicola Pratt and anthropologist Nadjé al-Ali published *What Kind of Liberation?* in 2009. This study of the US occupation of Iraq utilizes a range of journalistic, governmental, and NGO reports, in addition to extensive interviews with Iraqi women. Pratt and al-Ali argue that the US government, despite a discourse of "liberation," made conditions significantly worse for Iraqi women.³² They examine the gendered impact of the initial invasion in 2003, the ways in which women were politically marginalized as the US attempted to make Iraq into a puppet state, and the goals, activities, and challenges faced by Iraqi women activists.³³ I have been inspired by al-Ali and Pratt's analysis of politics in post-invasion Iraq, and while these authors focus mainly on Iraqi women activists, I attempt to broaden their discussion to include economic survival and writing as forms of resistance.

Fawaz A Gerges, in *ISIS: A History*, contextualizes ISIL's emergence, worldview, and brutality. He argues that the US and post-2003 Iraqi political elite share blame for ISIL's emergence, and that its horrific methods can be traced back to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, founder of ISIL's predecessor, al-Qaeda Iraq.³⁴ I supplement Gerges' work with gender-specific analyses of ISIL from scholars like Nadjé al-Ali, who argues that the sexual enslavement of Yezidi women in particular has been a part of a genocidal campaign against the Yezidi Kurds, a

³¹ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 54-5.

³² Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 2.

³³ Ibid., 20.

³⁴ Gerges, *ISIS*, 8-14.

religious minority found primarily in Iraq. Al-Ali also makes the important argument that, for many women, the violence does not end when they escape ISIL, but may continue via their families, foreign journalists, and even doctors.³⁵ I intervene in this historiography through discussions of the ways Iraqi women resisted both the violence and ISIL and violence perpetrated by foreign media when talking to ISIL survivors.

Methodology

This thesis is based on a wide variety of primary sources in an attempt to include the voices of as many Iraqi women as possible. I made use of blogs, interviews with refugees and women in exile, novels, UN reports, NGO reports, and nonfiction books written by Iraqi women. Whether a newspaper was based in the US, or an Arab state like Qatar, I tried to avoid journalistic biases by finding articles that quoted Iraqi women at length. To cover issues of US imperialism, I used reports from the US Congress, State Department, and Presidential Archives. I also analyzed the online magazines and religious rulings of ISIL to construct an argument about their worldview.

Because I am not fluent in Arabic or Kurdish, I mostly depended on English translations of Arabic sources. Many of the interviews I read with Iraqi women refugees were conducted via a translator, and in chapter one I discuss several Ba‘thist news articles translated by the US Foreign Broadcast Information Service. In an attempt to leave the voices of Iraqi women in-tact, I tried to use novels in which the original author also had a role in writing the translation. While this is not an ideal way to write a history of Iraqi women, I attempt to ground my conclusions in the secondary literature discussed above.

Statement of Positionality

³⁵ Nadjé al-Ali, “Sexual violence in Iraq: Challenges for transnational feminist politics,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 25, no. 1 (2018): 21-2.

The link between myself, my positionality, and the reasons I chose this research topic are all essential to understanding my findings. I am a white cisgender man from the midwestern United States, specifically rural Ohio. I was born in 1997, and while I do not remember the al-Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001, the so-called “War on Terror” was a constant background to my childhood. I remember believing that the US military was a force for good at age twelve, which leads me to believe that I internalized some of the Islamophobic, racist, and imperialist discourses I grew up with. However, I never identified with the conservative politics of the George W. Bush administration. Instead, my politics have continued to move leftwards as I have grown older. I entered college a liberal, and soon I will graduate a vehement anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist transnational feminist. In many ways, this research, which I began in the Spring of my Sophomore year of college, has informed my political views, and vice versa.

My initial research on Iraq led me to believe that the US’s 2003 invasion of Iraq was one of the most important factors in the creation of ISIL, and as my interests in gender studies grew, I wanted to learn more about the ways Iraqi women resisted US imperialism. As I began to develop my theoretical framework through readings books from anthropologist Nadjé al-Ali and sociologist Zahra Ali, both of whom study Iraqi women, I realized that it is not enough to be anti-imperialist. Instead, the approach I adopted from these authors attempts to acknowledge the gendered effects of imperialism without erasing local and regional manifestations of patriarchy.³⁶ This framework shaped the structure of my thesis.

Chapter Organization

This thesis is divided into three chapters, which move chronologically by historical period, roughly a decade each. It begins with a chapter on what I call the Sanctions Period, 1990-

³⁶ Nadjé al-Ali, “Sexual violence in Iraq,” 12-4.

2002, followed by another on the US occupation of 2003-2011, and finally a chapter covering the most recent period, 2012-2019, during which ISIL was established. Each chapter is divided into three main sections, two dealing with the violence of US imperialism and the Iraqi state (or ISIL in the third chapter). The third section of each chapter discusses the ways Iraqi women resisted the violence against them, whether it was a result of the US, the Iraqi government, or ISIL.

Chapter one examines the Sanctions Period, arguing that Iraqi women resisted the violence of war, sanctions, and a conservative religious campaign by the Ba‘th regime through informal economic activities, political mobilizations against the US, and through writing articles, poetry, and novels. Chapter two covers the US occupation, and it argues that during these years Iraqi women resisted the violence against them through continuing to engage in the informal economy, expanding their political activism, and blogging. Chapter three begins with a history of ISIL, arguing that US imperialism and the post-2003 Iraqi government created the conditions for ISIL to establish itself as a proto-state. It then turns to ISIL’s religious doctrine as it relates to women, and finally argues that Iraqi women resisted through new survival methods, adapting their political activism, and, among Kurdish women, volunteering to fight ISIL with the military.

Chapter 1:

The Stress of Sanctions

(1990-2002)

A middle-aged woman sits on a stool in her home in Baghdad, a few strands of hair poking out of her headscarf. A young girl stands next to her, swaying in-and-out of the frame, focused intensely on an unseen object. Speaking to a documentary filmmaker, the unnamed woman says, “I can’t even afford to buy my daughter a school bag. How can we feed our children when the prices are so high?”³⁷ This interview took place in 1992, only two years after the UN imposed economic sanctions, and one year after the US-led a coalition strike “Operation Desert Storm.” This unnamed woman was not alone in her struggle. Economic warfare in the form of sanctions, coupled with the destruction caused by Operation Desert Storm, led to the death and impoverishment of many Iraqis. These devastating wars had gender-specific impacts on Iraqi women, who faced inter-connected violence on communal, national, and trans-national scales.

Before going further, it is important to establish a brief timeline of events leading up to Operation Desert Storm. As a dictator, Saddam Hussein found himself in a particularly vulnerable position at the end of the Iran-Iraq in 1988. He was billions of dollars in debt, his neighboring Gulf countries were keen to lower oil prices, and there was a standing army of restless Iraqi soldiers who could not be demobilized for fear of contributing to unemployment and unrest.³⁸ After privatization and austerity measures failed to help his economic situation,

³⁷ *Greetings from Iraq*, directed by Signe Taylor, (Stanford: Department of Communications of Stanford University, 1992).

³⁸ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 241-2; Amatzia Baram, “The Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait,” in *The Saddam Hussein Reader*, ed. Turi Munthe (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002), 253.

Saddam decided to invade Kuwait to seize its plentiful oil reserves. The Iraqi army invaded Kuwait on the August 2nd, 1990. The US first responded on August 6th by using its dominant position in the UN to pass a Security Council resolution banning all trade with Iraq. In the following months, the US built a coalition army that invaded Iraq and Kuwait in January 1991.³⁹ As will be seen below, these actions by the US, along with Saddam Hussein's response, had far reaching consequences.

This chapter investigates the years 1990-2002, or what I refer to as the “Sanctions Period.” It traces the major events of this period, including Operation Desert Storm, the imposition of sanctions, and their economic, social, and political affects. It investigates the gender-specific impacts of these events, and the ways in which Iraqi women struggled to survive and resist. I begin by looking at the Ba‘th regime and how its “tribo-Islamic” policies, based on religious and kin-based power structures, strengthened male control over Iraqi women during this period. Next, I turn to US imperialism in Iraq as practiced through sanctions and the destruction of Iraq's civilian infrastructure during Operation Desert Storm. The chapter then moves to a close examination of the strategies women used to survive against crushing odds, and the ways in which more fortunate women took political action to resist the many forms of violence they faced.

This chapter is somewhat unique in that the Iraqi women who appear in it are less likely to be identified based on their sect and ethnicity than the women in the following chapters. Sectarianism was not as common or normalized in ‘90s like it has become since the US occupation began.⁴⁰ Most of my sources are from the ‘90s, as opposed to retrospective accounts,

³⁹ Tripp, *Iraq*, 241-44; Dina Rizk Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 40-44.

⁴⁰ Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 62; Zamir al-Haddad (pseudonym), interview, August 21, 2019.

and as a result they do not reflect today's sectarian political climate. If the women in this chapter had given this information I would have provided it, but they either did not, or in the case of the authors I mention, I was unable to find it in my research. In terms of ethnicity, I have decided not to include narratives from Iraqi Kurdistan in this chapter. From 1991-2003, Iraqi Kurdistan was a de-facto autonomous state, and circumstances there were so different from the rest of Iraq that most scholars of Iraqi women's history include separate chapters to cover the region, even in the periods after 2003.⁴¹ In the following chapter I attempt to re-incorporate Iraqi Kurdistan into this narrative. In this chapter, however, I did not believe it possible to effectively contextualize and analyze Iraqi women's resistance in both Iraqi Kurdistan and Southern Iraq.⁴²

(1) Patriarchal Policies of the Ba'th regime

The strategies used by Saddam Hussein and the Ba'th authoritarian regime to control its population were completely rewritten during the Sanctions Period. First, it is important to note that Saddam Hussein and his cronies became extremely rich as a result of UN sanctions.⁴³ Civilians bore the brunt of the poverty, disease, and malnutrition that sanctions brought with them. Historian Charles Tripp argues that this contrast between the country's rulers and its masses helped keep Saddam Hussein in power, because it allowed him to create a "Shadow State." Tripp defines this term as a patron-client network that decentralized the government, disempowered its institutions, and awarded resources based on loyalty to Saddam Hussein.⁴⁴

Another governing strategy that helped keep Saddam Hussein in office was his "faith campaign." Without a strong, centralized state, Saddam Hussein needed the support of Iraq's

⁴¹ This is true in *What Kind of Liberation?* By Nadjé al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, *Women and Gender in Iraq* by Zahra Ali, and *Women in Iraq* by Yasmin Husein al-Jawaheri.

⁴² "Southern Iraq" is a convenient term to delineate the areas outside Iraqi Kurdistan that have a majority-Arab population, including Northwest Iraq, Central Iraq, and the South of Iraq. It is used by authors like Zahra Ali.

⁴³ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 3.

⁴⁴ Tripp, *Iraq*, 259-64.

tribal and religious leaders. Islamism, or the politicized form of Islam, was already sweeping the region, and Saddam Hussein used this to his advantage. While his “neopatriarchal state” of the ‘70s and ‘80s took power away from tribal and religious forms of patriarchy, his tribo-Islamic policies of the ‘90s returned that power. This happened at the direct expense of Iraqi women’s rights. For example, in 1990 a law was passed allowing gender-based violence to be committed based on perceived moral transgressions, and in 1994 prostitution became punishable by death.⁴⁵

Moreover, in the aftermath of Desert Storm and during sanctions, Saddam Hussein’s discourse attempted to re-shape Iraqi identity around the victimized Iraqi woman.⁴⁶ At a 1992 ceremony where he awarded several women with medals for their bravery during Operation Desert Storm, Saddam Hussein said, “Almighty God wished to expose falsehood on the largest scale with the Ibn-Khaldun ship incident. The [Western] aggressors attacked unarmed women and their children.”⁴⁷ This quote is emblematic of the way Saddam Hussein pivoted with regard to gender policy. As the state decentralized, Saddam Hussein stopped promoting women’s rights like he had in the ‘70s and ‘80s. Instead, he pandered to conservative men who did not value women’s rights, and with whom he needed to stay in favor with to ensure their loyalty.⁴⁸

In addition, Iraqi women faced multiple barriers to formal employment under sanctions due to the state’s inability to maintain a large public sector. The public sector, strong during the 70s and into the 80s, shrank as the Ba’th regime’s welfare state collapsed and it privatized much of the economy.⁴⁹ This had previously been the most socially acceptable sphere for women to work in, and it provided women with exceptional benefits, such as paid maternity leave, on site-

⁴⁵ Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 112. For example, the legal age for marriage was 18, but this was no longer enforced during the last years of Saddam.

⁴⁶ Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime*, 217.

⁴⁷ Baghdad INA, “Saddam Awards Medals, Discusses Women’s Role,” trans. Federal Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), March 4, 1992.

⁴⁸ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 96-8.

⁴⁹ Tripp, *Iraq*, 241-2.

day care, and the assurance of a safe work environment. Women who lost their job in the public sector found it difficult to find employment in the private sector due to social stigma. For women who *were* able to retain a job in the public sector, they did not have incentive to continue working. Wages amounted to a few dollars a month, and the employment benefits available to women during the 70s and 80s were gone along with the welfare state. Al-Jawaheri's research shows that while unemployment rose among Iraqi women, they became more dependent on men. For women who did work, their desperate need for money made them less likely to speak out against unhealthy work environments.⁵⁰

(2) The Sole Superpower: US Imperialism and Iraqi women

Operation Desert Storm was a new height of US imperialism in Iraq. In 1990 the Soviet Union was on its last legs. The US was emboldened by the end of the Cold War— for the past 50 years its foreign policy in the Middle East had been dictated by calculations about the Soviet Union's potential response, but this was no longer the case. Many Arab states, including Iraq, had been socialist states and allies of the USSR, but the US could now act as the sole superpower in the region. The US's confidence and nonchalance are present in a July 1990 conversation between US ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie and Saddam Hussein. According to a transcription from the Iraqi government, Glaspie practically gave Iraq the green light to attack Kuwait when she told him “we [the US] have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait... The issue is not associated with America.”⁵¹ This turned out to be far from the truth, and within a year the US had effectively demonstrated its new global powers

⁵⁰ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 35-46.

⁵¹ “Excerpts from Iraqi Document on Meeting with U.S. Envoy,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/23/world/confrontation-in-the-gulf-excerpts-from-iraqi-document-on-meeting-with-us-envoy.html>.

by carrying out a devastating land and air war, and using its position in the UN to pass the most comprehensive set of economic sanctions to date.

Operation Desert Storm began on January 16th with an aerial bombardment that lasted six weeks. During the air war, the US used illegal weapons such as napalm, fuel-air explosives, and “superbombs,”⁵² and it chose not to distinguish between civilian and military personnel. The same was true for infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, highways, oil wells and refineries, and food storage facilities. Formally, the ground war only lasted 4 days, though US troops continued to attack and occupy Iraqi territory for several days thereafter.⁵³ During Operation Desert Storm the US violated the Hague and Geneva Conventions, the Nuremberg Charter, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, among other international laws and treaties.⁵⁴ The US’s disregard for Iraqi lives is made clear by noting its conduct during these months, and it is to the gender-specific ways that US foreign policy affected Iraqi women that we now turn.

US imperialism had devastating impacts on Iraqi women, especially with regards to health and healthcare. With the Soviet Union in disarray and nearly dissolved, President George H. W. Bush and his administration easily whipped the United Nations Security Council votes needed to pass a resolution forbidding all trade with Iraq. While in previous decades the Iraqi state generously subsidized healthcare and offered gender-specific services, like reproductive education and ante and post-natal services, after 1991 it was unable to so much as repair many of the hospitals destroyed by the coalition bombings. Perhaps more urgent was the fact that trade prohibitions prevented desperately needed medicine and equipment from entering the country.⁵⁵

⁵² According to Ramsey Clark, superbombs weigh about 2.5 tons and are designed to pierce bomb shelters, with the intention to kill protected government leaders. Ramsey Clark, “Charge of War Crimes Against US,” in *The Saddam Hussein Reader*, ed. Turi Munthe (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002), 325-6.

⁵³ Tripp, *Iraq*, 245

⁵⁴ Clark, “Charge of War Crimes,” 315-25.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 324.

The US's actions also impacted women's mental health by indirectly placing an extra burden on them as heads of households and housekeepers. This burden was a result of social norms wherein women were responsible for domestic care within most of Iraqi society. As their living standards decreased and family members became sick with newly untreatable diseases, Iraqi women took on an incredible emotional burden that impacted their physical and mental health. Research by Yasmin al-Jawaheri shows that, by 2000, more than 9 in 10 Iraq women were experiencing health problems like anxiety, headaches, high blood pressure, depression, and irregular menstruation.⁵⁶ The Sanctions Period was a horrific time to be a mother or bare children, as over half a million children and infants died from malnutrition between 1991 and 1995, according to a study done by the UN.⁵⁷ Infant mortality and malnutrition rates such as these had not been seen since the 1950s.⁵⁸

Economic sanctions coupled with US-led airstrikes also decimated the prospects for Iraqi women's education. The Iraqi state had previously been a beacon of education in the region, well known for its advanced universities and praised for its illiteracy eradication efforts. This changed during sanctions, which hit Iraq's education department especially hard. Many schools were destroyed during Operation Desert Storm, and sanctions prevented up-to-date textbooks or basic school supplies from entering the country. The lack of funds to rebuild and repair schools left many schools without adequate amounts of drinking water, or hygienic bathrooms. Most families were asked to pay public-school fees they could not afford. This, coupled with a lack of economic opportunity for women, led many parents to prefer paying for the education of a son rather than a daughter, and a drop in women's enrolment in primary and secondary schools. This

⁵⁶ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 121-2.

⁵⁷ Barbara Crossette, "Iraq Sanctions Kill Children, U.N. Reports," *New York Times*, December 1, 1995, accessed November 22, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/01/world/iraq-sanctions-kill-children-un-reports.html>.

⁵⁸ Tripp, *Iraq*, 152.

outcome had a gender-specific effect Iraqi women, as it is widely accepted that women's education, coupled with their participation in the labor force, tends to improve gender equality.⁵⁹

(3) Iraqi Women From Economic Survival to Political Resistance

In her novel *Absent*, Iraqi writer Betoool Khedairi follows several Iraqi women and the different ways in which they cope with the widespread poverty brought on by sanctions. Umm Ghayeb, one of the main characters, begins selling homemade clothes after her husband, Abu Ghayeb, loses his job as a state employee. However, despite providing her home with a source of income, Umm Ghayeb is still expected to do all of the housework. When he arrives home, Umm Ghayeb sets out her husband's slippers and puts away his shoes. She cooks for the family. In addition, her sudden status as the family's provider creates tension between her and Abu Ghayeb, who complains, "we're drowning in a sea of beads, buttons, and thread."⁶⁰ As the narrative unfolds, Abu Ghayeb becomes increasingly desperate to start a successful business.

Khedairi's novel reflects several realities of sanctions. Selling homemade clothes and taking jobs as domestic servants existed before sanctions, but during the '90s these economic activities became commonplace for many impoverished Iraqi women.⁶¹ In addition, the tension in Umm Ghayeb's marriage reflect a pattern noticed by al-Jawaheri, whose sociological study found that widespread poverty was accompanied by increased attempts by men to control the education, careers, and behaviors of the women in their lives.⁶² Iraqi women had these and other factors working against them during sanctions, and their means of resistance can be, for simplicity's sake, divided into two categories: economic survival and political resistance.

⁵⁹ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 58-70.

⁶⁰ Betoool Khedairi, *Absent*, originally published as *Ghayeb* in 2004, trans. Muhayman Jamil, (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 22.

⁶¹ Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 109.

⁶² Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 100-4.

Economic Survival

During the Sanctions Period, many Iraqi women turned to informal economic activities to stay alive. One activity that seems to have been used by low-income women in particular is domestic work such as cleaning houses.⁶³ Scholars such as Louise Cainkar have argued convincingly that domestic work—paid or unpaid—goes unappreciated in most societies because of its gendered connotation, and because it takes place out of the view of the public eye. This was certainly true in Iraq during the sanctions period. The gendered aspect of domestic work provided a form of employment to Iraqi women when their options were otherwise limited, though it also left women vulnerable to abuse.⁶⁴

Afrah Jassim, one of over 30 women interviewed as a part of an oral history project led by Dr. Laura Hamblin, resisted the violence of US imperialism and the Ba’th regime by fighting to stay alive. Most of the interviews were conducted in 2007, in Amman, Jordan, with Iraqi women who were there as refugees. Afrah Jassim lived in Baghdad until 1997, when she took refuge in Jordan. She hoped to find more economic opportunities abroad, though she found her options were mostly limited to cleaning houses. Because of the association of Iraq and poverty during the Sanctions Period, many people assumed that she was a sex worker:

I noticed that even in the office where I work as a cleaner, they tend to send me to houses where they have bachelors and men. Even then they were approaching me. It was very hard... I work, even though they use my flesh—that’s the expression in Arabic. I am being harassed, but I can still work.⁶⁵

This quote from Afrah shows that being able to work was more important to her than the abusive conditions under which she worked. Desperate to work, Afrah put up with these conditions

⁶³ Nadjé al-Ali, *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present*, (New York: Zed Books, 2007), 187.

⁶⁴ Louis Cainkar, “The Gulf War, Sanctions, and the Lives of Iraqi Women,” in *Arab Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 2, (Spring 1993): 18-9.

⁶⁵ Laura Hamblin, “Afrah Fawzi Jassim transcript,” *Iraqi Women Refugees*, trans. Hala al-Sarraf, interview, (Amman, Jordan: January 13, 2008), http://www.iraqiwomenrefugees.com/?page_id=367.

because it was between that and being unable to pay her rent or support her daughter. Although she is a displaced Iraqi woman in Amman, Afrah's story is representative of the conditions many Iraqi women had to deal with in Iraq itself, or as refugees in neighboring countries. Her story is heartbreaking but ultimately one of survival.

A coping mechanism used across class-lines was selling non-essential household items. The extent to which women partook in this, however, did depend on their class status. Dr. Huda al-Jawad, a professor from Baghdad, provides an example of what this looked like among middle-class professionals. Reflecting on the Sanctions Period, she says, "[my husband and I] started selling most of the things that we thought were luxuries and started living from these things... Now when I remember the books I had to sell for that period I cry because these were very valuable".⁶⁶ Dr. Jawad's story demonstrates the collapse of what was formerly a thriving middle class that included many women. It also shows the emotional sacrifices that she made, namely letting go of a piece of herself in the form of her books, which are essential to academic life. As much as it hurt to do so, Dr. Al-Jawad was lucky to have valuable books to sell.

The more impoverished people became, the lower the definition of "luxuries," became. The unnamed woman, interviewed for a 1992 documentary and mentioned above, explains, "we had two deep freezers– we sold them. We had a washing machine– we sold it. I had some gold jewelry– I sold it, and now we are spending the money to survive." The goods she lists here are not so different from what can be found in a typical middle-class home in America, and one might suspect that she made a reasonable profit from this. She specifies that she is using the money to "survive," but what did survival look like in 1992, with more than a decade to go before the sanctions were lifted? The unnamed woman explains:

⁶⁶ Laura Hamblin, "Dr. Huda Al-Jawad Transcript," *Iraqi Women Refugees*, interview, trans. Hala al-Sarraf, transcribed by Cathryn Thayne, (Amman, Jordan: November 4, 2007).

When we go to the market we can't afford to buy anything anymore. Everyone is getting sick— diabetes and heart disease. I developed diabetes. When I go to the hospital there's no medicine... The government issues booklets so you can buy medicine for diabetes. But all I can get are little pills, which don't help. There are no insulin injections at all.⁶⁷

As this interview suggests, selling off personal items may not have been enough for some Iraqi women. It was not clear if this woman was an FHH, a demographic that made up 20% of the population after the Operation Desert Storm, but if she was, she would have been far more likely to fall into extreme poverty.⁶⁸

Iraqi women living in extreme poverty had to resort to much drastic means of overcoming severe economic hardship. As the unnamed woman ran out of things to sell, or was unable to find work, it is possible she turned to begging. She would have been in the company of many other Iraqi women, observed by researchers weaving through Baghdad traffic in the all-black *abaya*, covering everything but their faces, palms extended for help. As she and her child reached the point of starvation, she may have sold the door off their house.⁶⁹ If it did not come to this point, it is unclear whether she could have received the necessary medical care to manage her diabetes, especially with the hospitals lacking medical supplies under the sanctions.⁷⁰ This is to say that there were limits to these economic survival strategies.

Writing for Political Resistance

In 1991, thousands of Iraqis in the urban South took to the streets calling for the end of the Ba'th regime. Their prosperity in the '70s and '80s had been accompanied by brutal repression of any opposition, and Saddam Hussein had spent the last ten years dragging the country into unnecessary wars for which they paid with their lives. Saddam Hussein showed no

⁶⁷ *Greetings from Iraq*, directed by Signe Taylor, (1992).

⁶⁸ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 104.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁷⁰ Tripp, *Iraq*, 151-52; Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 2-4.

mercy to this uprising, openly attacking his own citizens with military-style strikes. His ruthlessness made politically organizing one's community a difficult task, even among men.⁷¹ However, the state was not as strong as it had been in the '80s, which left more room for political acts of dissent in which women often engaged.⁷²

Saddam Hussein and the Ba'th regime allowed women to politically organize against the US, but not against the regime itself. For example, a 1990 article published by the state-run newspaper *Baghdad INA* described a group of "glorious Iraqi women" taking actions to condemn UN sanctions. The article states that these women wrote a list of grievances which they handed the US chargé d'affaires in Baghdad. The letter protested the US's leadership role in imposing the sanctions, saying average Iraqis would suffer from a lack of access to basic necessities like food and medicine.⁷³ In fact, the Iraqi women in question may have been put up to the task of handing this letter of protest to the US chargé d'affaires by Saddam himself, but this does not mean they were passive actors of the regime. Zahra Ali's ethnographic study shows that many women worked for the regime out of convenience in the 1990s but found ways to exercise agency within certain constraints.⁷⁴ The letter written by these women likely reflected their own sense of outrage at US actions.

The Ba'th regime occasionally mobilized women for anti-sanctions demonstrations. This gave them a chance to express their anger at US imperialism. One such incident, also described in an article from *Baghdad INA*, took place in 1992 at the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation in Baghdad. A large group of women demonstrated in response to actions taken by a UN inspection team, led by Americans. Next-day coverage of the demonstration from *Baghdad INA*

⁷¹ "The Iraqi Government Assault on the Marsh Arabs," *Human Rights Watch*, January 25, 2003.

⁷² Tripp, *Iraq*, 246-8. Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime*, 11.

⁷³ *Baghdad INA*, "Women Give Protest Memo to U.S. Official," trans. FBIS, Nov 7, 1990.

⁷⁴ Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 113-5.

suggests these were not spontaneous acts, but organized by Ba’thists within the ministry.⁷⁵ In an interview I conducted with a male professor who spent the ‘90s teaching in Baghdad, he recalled political actions taken by women similar to the one described in this article. For a demonstration like this, he says, they would have brought home-made signs and placards to leave at the door of the ministry, and chanted slogans denouncing American aggression.⁷⁶ Dina Khoury argues obligatory pro-Iraq actions may have been one of the most important factors in keeping the regime intact during sanctions. However, it is likely Iraqi women had agency when participating in at least some protests like this one, as the events Khoury refers to were more likely to be celebrations of Saddam Hussein’s birthday, for example.⁷⁷

Because of the limitations imposed by the state on women’s ability to organize politically, some educated women resorted to writing as their main, and sometimes only, tool of resistance. Hadia Hussein is a writer who was employed by state-run newspapers in Baghdad for most of the ‘90s. Women like Hadia, who had the privilege of stable employment and an elevated voice during sanctions, had the option to resist the Ba’th regime and its tribo-Islamic policies through their reporting. However, in doing so they were risking their jobs, freedoms, and lives. To successfully critique the regime in its newspapers required subtlety and nuance. Hadia and her colleagues cloaked their dissent by diluting their language, referring to legends, and praying their articles made it past the censors.⁷⁸ In recalling a coworker who was caught by the regime, Hadia says, “he was taken from his house, and he was never seen after that”.⁷⁹ It is impossible to know what happened to this man for sure, but given Saddam Hussein’s willingness

⁷⁵ Baghdad INA, “Protest Against UN Teams ‘Spontaneous’,” trans. FBIS, July 8, 1992.

⁷⁶ Zamir al-Haddad (pseudonym), interview, August 21, 2019.

⁷⁷ Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime*, 159.

⁷⁸ Laura Hamblin, “Hadia Hussein Transcript”, *Iraqi Women Refugees*, trans. Hala al-Sarraf, interview, January 13, 2008, accessed January 7, 2020, http://www.iraqiwomenrefugees.com/?page_id=108.

⁷⁹ Hamblin, “Hadia Hussein Transcript.”

to have members of his immediate family assassinated, and his use of chemical weapons against his own population,⁸⁰ it seems likely that Hadia's friend was subject to arbitrary execution.

Despite the risks, Hadia resisted the Ba'ath regime through journalism.

In the midst of the violence of sanctions and the Ba'ath regime, Hadia, along with many other Iraqi women, found refuge in poetry. Hadia was writing poetry even in the 70's, when Iraq was prospering and providing women with the best education the region had to offer.⁸¹ But as her country was dragged into one war after another, and as the regime became more openly repressive, poetry took on a more important role in her life. "I think it was the number of wars we've been through," she says, "poetry [took] me to an imaginary place that didn't exist at that time."⁸² For Hadia, poetry provided an escape from the suffering of war. It is widely accepted among feminist scholars that poetry is a form of resistance. In her seminal essay, "Poetry is not a Luxury," Audre Lorde argues that, for women, and perhaps black and brown women especially, poetry is a necessity. It puts women in touch with a hidden source of their power that can become "spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas."⁸³ This seems true for Hadia, who eventually left Iraq so that she could write more openly about her experiences.

As she developed as a writer, Hadia felt called to turn towards a different and less accessible medium to express herself: the novel. This was a gradual shift which Hadia felt was necessary if she was to process the loss that accompanies war.

At that time, because of the wars, stories served me better than poetry. So I started writing stories. But after a while I realized that because of my experience at work [as a journalist], because of what I see at work, because I've accumulated so many stories in my head, that I needed to let [them] out through a different means which

⁸⁰ Tripp, *Iraq*, 235-42.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 200-7.

⁸² Hamblin, "Hadia Hussein Transcript."

⁸³ Audre Lorde, "Poetry is not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 37.

is more detailed. So I started writing novels because novels give you all the detail—the nitty gritty details of the situation.⁸⁴

Hadia's novels were an extension of what her poetry had done for her. They took her away from reality and into a world where she had some control, a space where it was easier to confront loss. By 1999, she realized she would never be able to publish her books as she wanted to under the Ba'th regime, so she moved to Jordan. Her novels quickly earned her a spot on a list of authors blacklisted by the regime, making it impossible for her to return home or contact her family in Iraq.⁸⁵

Another Iraqi author is Betool Khedairi, who grew up in Baghdad with a Scottish mother and Iraqi father. She spent much of the Sanctions Period travelling between the UK, Jordan, and Iraq, giving her a perspective on sanctions unavailable to most.⁸⁶ Her novel, *Absent*, mentioned above, was published just after the Sanctions Period ended. Khedairi's work served the dual purpose of self-expression and elevating of Iraqi women's stories. Much like Hadia, Khedairi has noted the healing role that her creativity plays in her life, saying in an interview, "I write for myself... I can't imagine myself in another career."⁸⁷ In addition to giving her a sense of purpose, Khedairi's novels have made an impact on audiences all over the world. Her first novel, *A Sky So Close*, has been translated into three languages, and her second novel, *Absent*, is available in both Arabic and English.⁸⁸

Khedairi uses several techniques to raise awareness of the impacts that UN sanctions and Operation Desert Storm had on Iraqi women and men during the Sanctions Period. At the

⁸⁴ Hamblin, "Hadia Hussein Transcript," interview.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ "Betool Khedairi," *Penguin Random House*, accessed April 25, 2020, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/15582/betool-khedairi/>

⁸⁷ "Interview: Betool Khedairi and Her World of Words" accessed February 16, 2020, http://www.betoolkhedairi.com/press_en4.htm.

⁸⁸ "A Sky So Close: A Journey Through War and Loss," *The Daily Star*, March 27, 2003, accessed April 25, 2020, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Art/2003/Mar-27/111443-a-sky-so-close-a-journey-through-war-and-loss.ashx>.

beginning of several chapters in *Absent*, Khedairi include quotes that provide the reader with more insight into the real-life devastation caused by the US-led coalition and sanctions. For example, chapter three starts with the following, “[in 1991] some 88,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Iraq, an explosive tonnage judged equivalent to seven Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs.”⁸⁹ The emotional connection offered by the novel format, and the shock-factor of statistics such as this complement each other well, and Khedairi uses them to offer a critique of the US.

Khedairi also draws attention to the gender-specific impacts that the US and Ba’th regime’s actions had on Iraqi women. Dalal, the protagonist, has a friend, Ilham, who works in a hospital. Ilham’s mood is frequently affected by the number of sick and dying children that she attempts to treat on a daily basis. Ilham confides in Dalal, saying,

I wish I could escape from the hospital, to get away from the image of little ones when they die... The children in the South play with leftover shrapnel from the bombing. They’re the victims of depleted uranium from the air raids over the areas extending from Basra to Karbala, and as far as Baghdad.⁹⁰

As Ilham shares this with Dalal, she gives the reader insight into the hard realities on the ground in Iraq during this period. Ilham’s character also demonstrates the way Iraqi women ultimately picked up much of the emotional burden during the Sanctions Period. This phenomenon is documented with imperial evidence by sociologist Yasmin al-Jawaheri, who found that sanctions caused significant psychological harm to Iraqi women, regardless of their age or class.⁹¹ By dramatizing these realities, Khedairi elevates the struggle of Iraqi women, resisting the violence of the US and Ba’th regime by drawing attention to its gendered nature.

Conclusion

⁸⁹ Khedairi, *Absent*, 24.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁹¹ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 125-26.

Throughout the Sanctions Period, Iraqi women resisted the gender-specific impacts of US imperialism and the harmful policies of the Ba'th regime through their survival tactics and political resistance. While their ability to organize and protest under a one-party state was limited, Iraqi women did so, and were politically active through their writing as well. In post-2003 Iraq, new technology and regime change made it possible for both of these resistance methods to be developed further. While the US occupation marked the end of the UN sanctions, Iraq's economy continued to collapse. As a result, many of the economic survival tactics from the Sanctions Period would continue and some would move beyond Iraq's borders.

Chapter 2:

A Gendered Occupation

(2003-2011)

I am female and Muslim. Before the occupation, I more or less dressed the way I wanted to. I lived in jeans and cotton pants and comfortable shirts. Now, I don't dare leave the house in pants. A long skirt and loose shirt (preferably with long sleeves) has become necessary. A girl wearing jeans risks being attacked, abducted, or insulted by fundamentalists who have been... liberated!

-Riverbend, *August 23, 2003*⁹²

A Baghdadi woman under the pseudonym “Riverbend” began blogging her experience of the US occupation in August 2003. Before the occupation, Riverbend worked as a computer scientist. Being in her early 30s, she had received much of her education before the UN embargo, and likely remembered life before the Iran-Iraq war militarized Iraqi society. Her blog posts ranged in subject from her daily life, to her memories of the invasion, to her thoughts on the way the media was covering the war in Iraq. Riverbend’s wonderful writing style was quickly recognized, and her blog has been published as a series of books. Her blog is closed now, and the last of the posts in her books is from 2006. But in the wake of the Iraqi uprisings in October 2019 I reached out to Riverbend through email to inquire about her views about the corrupt, fragmented state that the US left behind. She told me, “I’m doing especially well with everything happening back home— there’s an *actual* revolution [happening]”.⁹³

The US launched “Operation Iraqi Freedom” on March 19, 2003. By April 9, Saddam Hussein’s security forces had been overwhelmed by and fallen to the US-led coalition.⁹⁴ The US quickly established the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), which oversaw the dissolution of

⁹² Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog From Iraq*, (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2005), 17.

⁹³ Riverbend, email to the author, October 30, 2019 (my emphasis).

⁹⁴ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 274.

the Ba'th party and the Iraqi military, putting about 30,000 experienced administrators and 300,000 armed men out of work in one fell swoop.⁹⁵ In 2003 and 2004 the US oversaw the implementation of economic reforms which benefitted foreign profiteers more than the average Iraqi citizen. It also failed to rebuild the infrastructure it destroyed during the invasion, leaving many Iraqis without access to hospitals or running water.⁹⁶ The 2004 Abu-Ghraib torture scandal demonstrated that the US had adopted many of the same terror tactics formerly used by Saddam Hussein.⁹⁷ As the new Iraqi government took shape, insurgencies grew from all sides, and sectarian violence exploded into a civil war in 2006.⁹⁸ In the last years of the occupation, 2008-2011, as President Barack Obama and his administration began preparing for withdrawal, the US supported an increasingly authoritarian Iraqi Prime Minister by the name of Nuri al-Maliki.⁹⁹

As Riverbend's commentary shows, the US invasion and Occupation of Iraq was a gendered affair. It began, in many ways, on September 11, 2001. Political theorist Roxanne L. Euben has argued the "violation of human dignity" often results in the mobilization of masculinities.¹⁰⁰ After experiencing the first modern attack on its own soil on 9/11, the US sought to re-assert its dominance, or masculinity, to the world through the so-called "War on Terror." Historian Christine de Matos and law professor Rowena Ward have argued that occupations are masculine affairs by nature, with complex webs of hierarchical and gendered relationships among "occupiers" and "occupied." Gendered power relations are present in every action and play out on a daily basis. Occupied women are usually said to be "liberated" but face harm from occupying forces. Likewise, they argue that the violence of occupation "emasculates"

⁹⁵ Tripp, *Iraq*, 282.

⁹⁶ Michael Schwartz, *War Without End: The Iraq War in Context*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), 33-35, 43-45.

⁹⁷ Tripp, *Iraq*, 289-92.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 306-9.

⁹⁹ Fawaz Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 106-15.

¹⁰⁰ Roxanne L Euben, "Humiliation and the Political Mobilization of Masculinity," in *Political Theory* 43, no. 4, (August 2015): 500-4.

occupied men, who reassert their masculinity through violence towards and control over women.¹⁰¹

In this chapter I investigate the military occupation and subsequent economic and political control of the Iraqi state by a US-led coalition, which began in early 2003 and lasted until the end of 2011. My goal is to demonstrate ways in which Iraqi women resisted threats to their legal rights and personal safety during this period. This chapter begins by investigating the gender-specific impacts of the occupation's choices militarily, economically, and politically. I also consider the new governing institutions which formed in the wake of the occupation, and the effect that their formation and policies had on Iraqi women. Finally, I turn to the actions of Iraqi women themselves, looking first into the ways they survived through their economic activity. The last section is about women's political resistance, and, more specifically the way they used writing to resist the violence of imperialism and patriarchy.

(1) Gendering US Foreign Policy: Shock, Awe, and Decentralization

The same year the US decided to occupy Iraq, Charlotte M. Ponticelli started working for the US Department of State as the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues. In a speech she delivered about a week after US troops landed in Iraq, titled "Respect for Women," she said that President Bush's policy in Iraq aimed at "ensuring women's rights" which in turn "strengthens democracy, bolsters prosperity, enhances stability, encourages tolerance and builds a more peaceful and stable world."¹⁰² However, the US occupation of Iraq failed to guarantee women's legal rights, or create a strong democracy, nor did it provide them with peace and

¹⁰¹ Christine de Matos and Rowena Ward, "Analyzing Gendered Occupation Power," in *Gender, Power, and Military Occupations: Asia Pacific and the Middle East Since 1945*, ed. Christine de Matos and Rowena Ward (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1-7.

¹⁰² Charlotte M. Ponticelli, "Respect for Women: The Bush Administrations Firm Commitment," *US Department of State Archive*, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/wi/19423.htm>.

prosperity. From the very beginning, the US's actions suggest it had little understanding of, or care for, the gendered impacts of its occupation.

The US adopted the “shock-and-awe” doctrine in the lead-up to its invasion of Iraq, which was intended to traumatize Iraqi citizens. Naomi Klein documents this twofold strategy in her aptly titled book *The Shock Doctrine*. The first step was to subject the entire Iraqi population to a literal terror campaign— an ironic aspect of the so-called “War on Terror”— through sensory deprivation and sensory overload. Sensory deprivation took place through destroying communication infrastructure and forcing power-outages. Sensory overload took the form of a bombing campaign that demonstrated the US's military might. These tactics were used in an attempt to traumatize the Iraqi population because the US believed that doing so would make them less resistant to the dramatic social and economic changes that would follow the invasion.¹⁰³

The second step of shock-and-awe began in mid-2003 after the US overthrew the Ba'ath regime and formed a temporary governing body, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). This step was called “economic shock therapy,” and it involved passing a series of laws which sold off all public industry, weakened unions, and opened Iraq to the global economy.¹⁰⁴ The only industry that remained nationalized was oil, but all of its profits were controlled by the CPA regardless.¹⁰⁵ These policies generated wealth for US businesses, but worsened poverty and unemployment levels in Iraq. For example, coalition forces destroyed civilian infrastructure during the invasion to clear the way for foreign investment in reconstruction.¹⁰⁶ From 2003-2006 74% of construction contracts went to US-based companies, and only 2% to Iraqi companies.

¹⁰³ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 333-4.

¹⁰⁴ Schwartz, *War Without End*, 34-5.

¹⁰⁵ Klein, *Shock Doctrine*, 345.

¹⁰⁶ Schwartz, *War Without End*, 9.

This resulted in a labor force made up of foreigners with little at stake in the outcome of their reconstruction projects. They were paid regardless of whether or not they successfully rebuilt Iraqi hospitals, power plants, and water treatment plants. More often than not, they were unsuccessful, and Iraqis were left without healthcare, electricity, and clean water.¹⁰⁷

The CPA's economic policies had a particularly harsh effect on Iraqi women. In June 2003 the unemployment rate was around 50-60% for women, and in 2007 it remained between 25-40%. Regardless, women made up the majority of unemployed Iraqi workers. By gutting the public sector, typically a socially acceptable place for Iraqi women to work, the CPA limited the options of Iraqi women even more than during the sanctions period.¹⁰⁸ As will be seen below, the CPA also strengthened patriarchal forces in Iraq, which left women more dependent on male relatives. An economic assessment of women's employment in Iraq, conducted by the United Nations Development Programme, points to lack of permission and freedom of movement as one of the main hinderances to women's employment outside the home.¹⁰⁹

The invasion and CPA policies also created an environment of lawlessness that left Iraqi women vulnerable to gender-based violence, sexual assault, and kidnappings. Over two decades of wars and sanctions atomized Iraq society and weakened its social fabric.¹¹⁰ After the invasion, the relatively small size of the coalition forces rendered them unable to provide the country with security. In addition, the CPA's decision to dissolve the Ba'ath military in 2003 left around three hundred thousand armed men unemployed and enraged.¹¹¹ It is in this context that the Human Rights Watch (HRW) published report titled "Climate of Fear: Sexual Violence and Abduction

¹⁰⁷ Tripp, *Iraq*, 289-90

¹⁰⁸ Nadjé al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 72-3.

¹⁰⁹ "Women's Economic Empowerment: Integrating Women into the Iraqi Economy," *UNDP Iraq*, April 9, 2013: 20-2.

¹¹⁰ Gerges, *ISIS*, 9.

¹¹¹ Tripp, *Iraq*, 282.

of Women and Girls in Baghdad.” This report details the gendered impact of the security crisis in July 2003. Sexual violence and kidnappings were so common that many women and girls were not comfortable leaving the house, be it for work, school, or to seek medical assistance. HRW states that the problem was largely due to the failure of the US-led coalition to provide necessary protections or take Iraqi women seriously.¹¹²

The CPA’s policies also put women’s rights in the hands of conservative tribal and religious leaders. These policies were borrowed from Iraq’s history as a British “Mandate” from the years 1920-32. Historian Noga Efrati, in her book *Women in Iraq*, argues that the British legally rendered Iraqi women second-class citizens by letting matters of women’s rights be decided by tribal law.¹¹³ Iraqi women’s rights activists such as Songul Chapuk have argued that tribal law sees women as possessions, not fully fledged human beings, and British colonialism cemented these views as legal code.¹¹⁴ After the British-installed monarchy was overthrown in 1958, considerable progress was made to create a unifying legal code that protected women’s rights. As discussed in Chapter One, Saddam Hussein began the process of repealing or ignoring these laws, though the US-led CPA was influenced more by the British than Saddam Hussein. In 2003-2005 the CPA delegated power to tribal and religious leaders who took control of local security, and it allowed tribal courts to convene and make rulings regarding the women in their communities.¹¹⁵

While the CPA and the US-led coalition army were implementing violent economic policies, failing to provide Iraqis with security, and empowering patriarchal leaders, a new Iraqi

¹¹² “Climate of Fear: Sexual Violence and Abduction of Women and Girls in Baghdad,” *Human Rights Watch* 15, no. 7, (July 2003): 1-3.

¹¹³ Noga Efrati, *Women in Iraq: Past Meets Present*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), xiii; 4-5; 20-7.

¹¹⁴ Efrati, *Women in Iraq*, 166

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 166-7.

political elite was taking shape. It was primarily made up of formerly exiled Iraqi men who were in favor with the US.¹¹⁶ The formation of the new Iraqi government created a de-facto ethnosectarian quota system and politically marginalized Iraqi women. It is to this process and its ramifications to which I will now turn.

(2) Forming A More Patriarchal Union: The New Iraqi Elite

Despite US rhetoric about “liberation,” women were never intended to play a major role in the new Iraqi government. There were a few exiled Iraqis who helped American officials plan for after the invasion, but they were all men. Nadjé al-Ali and Nicola Pratt note that the formation of a government is a critical time for women to be integrated into the governing process, though they were not represented well in the first months or even years.¹¹⁷ The Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), formed in July 2003, was a largely cosmetic institution, as the CPA continued to exercise the most control over Iraqi politics. The IGC included only three women, and its formation institutionalized ethnosectarian quotas, meaning it included Shi‘i Arabs, Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and Christians proportional to their percent of the Iraqi population.¹¹⁸ A select group from the IGC, not including any women, passed the Transitional Authority Law in March 2004. This bill set a timeline for electing a transitional parliament, drafting a constitution, and holding a public referendum on the constitution, all before 2006.¹¹⁹

The January 2005 parliamentary elections were undemocratic, exacerbated sectarian tensions, and set the country on track for civil war. Sunni Arabs, outraged over being targeted by US military operations and their general exclusion from the new government, boycotted this election. It was also characterized by threats and intimidation from Islamist (and therefore

¹¹⁶ Tripp, *Iraq*, 286-87.

¹¹⁷ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 89.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 90-91.

¹¹⁹ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 94.

sectarian) militias at the polls.¹²⁰ Despite this, the elections went on as planned, and a transitional parliament was formed that barely functioned beyond the committee that drafted the new constitution.¹²¹ A significant achievement among Iraqi women activists was a stipulation that every third candidate on a political party's list had to be a woman. This ensured significant inclusion of women in the transitional parliament, but it did not ensure that women's issues were addressed.¹²² In fact, several scholars of Iraqi women's history have found that between 2005 and 2010 many women representatives were chosen by their party because they were *not* politically informed. They were only included in the parliament to fulfil the women's quota and vote with their respective party.¹²³

The drafting of the constitution was marked by many of the problems as the 2005 elections, and similarly brought about women's marginalization, this time in the drafting process. There were no Sunni Arabs on the drafting committee until very late in the process, adding to sectarian tensions and Sunni fears of political exclusion.¹²⁴ The committee was made up almost entirely of Shi'i Arab and Kurdish representatives, of whom only about 20% were women, some of whom were conservative Islamists who supported the tribalization of women's rights.¹²⁵ As the constitution was being written, laws protecting women's rights were often discarded in favor of federalist policies. These policies, rather than creating a unified law, left issues of women's rights vague and contributed to the increasing communal divides in Iraq.¹²⁶ The time between the

¹²⁰ Tripp, *Iraq*, 295.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹²² Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 106-7; Zahra Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq: Between Nation-Building and Fragmentation*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 150

¹²³ Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 148-49; Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 132.

¹²⁴ Tripp, *Iraq*, 296.

¹²⁵ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 111-12.

¹²⁶ Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 228-29.

publication of the constitution and its referendum gave little time for public input, especially from women's organizations who were lobbying to ensure that women's rights were protected.¹²⁷

The 2005 Constitution stripped Iraqi women of their rights through its emphasis on federalism and so-called "religious freedom," both of which were the results of institutionalized ethno-sectarianism. Article 1 of the constitution states that Iraq is a federal state. This creates problem for women's rights because it allows for different Iraqi regions to have their own laws in regard to women's personal status.¹²⁸ Without a unifying personal status code promulgated by a centralized government, women in more conservative areas of the country were left without protection from patriarchal violence. Moreover, Article 41 explicitly gave the responsibility of deciding women's personal status laws to the local level. Anthropologist Nadjie Al-Ali and political scientist Nicola Pratt argue that this had the effect of "legalizing discriminatory practices with regard to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance."¹²⁹ The new Iraqi political elite showed more concern with cementing its power than ensuring its citizens, especially women, were adequately protected by law.

As the US and new Iraqi political elite encouraged ethnosectarian politics, the security situation in Iraq was becoming worse by the day, resulting in a civil war.¹³⁰ In February 2006 the al-Askariyyah shrine, one of the most important Shi'a monuments in Iraq, was bombed in the Sunni-majority town of Samarra, creating a cycle of vicious sectarian violence and retaliation.¹³¹ This sectarian civil war, which lasted until the end of 2007, was not the inevitable outcome of Iraq's religious and ethnic makeup. It was motivated by class and political divisions.¹³² For

¹²⁷ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 111.

¹²⁸ Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 130.

¹²⁹ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 113-4.

¹³⁰ Tripp, *Iraq*, 305; Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 131, 141.

¹³¹ Tripp, *Iraq*, 306.

¹³² Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 140.

example, as the occupation dragged on and Iraq's economy continued to collapse, thousands of young men sat at home, unable to find a job. For these men, joining the local sectarian militia would have provided them with a source of income or a way to express their rage towards the occupying forces.¹³³ These militias carried out much of the violence of the Civil War. Baghdad became a warzone, and sectarian violence reorganized the city's population.¹³⁴

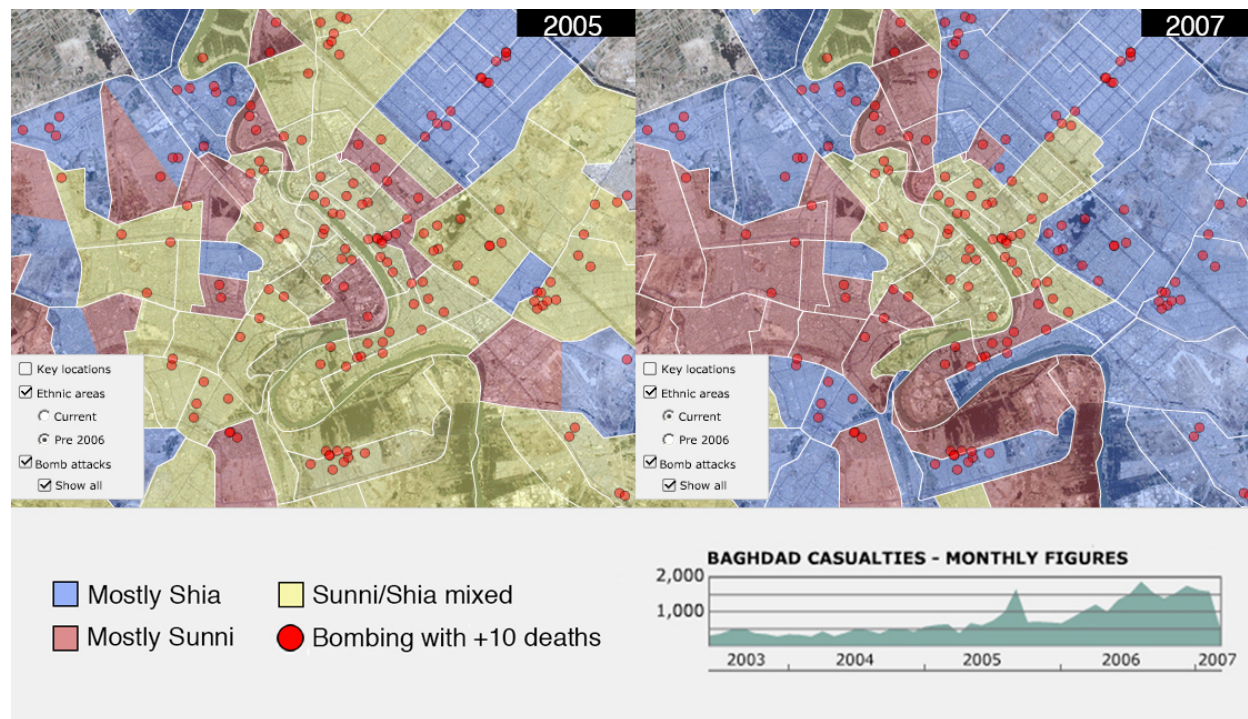


Figure 3: Segregation over time in Baghdad. Acquired through BBC News.¹³⁵

The sectarian Civil War left women particularly vulnerable. Due to widespread violence, many women were unable to access hospitals, and maternal mortality rates rose (a trend that began under UN sanctions in the 1990s).¹³⁶ By the Civil War of 2006 Iraq could be reasonably described as a failed state because it had very little ability to provide its citizens with security or

¹³³ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 75.

¹³⁴ Tripp, *Iraq*, 308.

¹³⁵ "Baghdad: Mapping the violence" *BBC News*, interactive map, accessed April 24, 2020, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/in_depth/baghdad_navigator/.

¹³⁶ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 72.

basic needs like running water, electricity, or employment.¹³⁷ Warring militias appeared in its place, many of which had strict Islamist rules that they imposed on all women, and those who did not comply were threatened and sometimes murdered.¹³⁸ According to Zahra Ali's ethnographic study, a common refrain heard among Iraqi women became "before we had one Saddam; today we have a Saddam at every street corner."¹³⁹ Because of the failing state, Iraqi women often had no one to turn to amidst this widespread violence.¹⁴⁰ This was not the case, however, for Iraqi women in the North.

Iraqi Kurdistan experienced the occupation in a different way as a result of its autonomy from Saddam Hussein during the sanctions period. Iraqi Kurdistan became a de-facto autonomous territory in 1991 after mass uprisings opposing the Ba'th regime, and the establishment of "no-fly zones" preventing Saddam's army from reasserting control. This meant that, by 2003, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) had already been functioning independent of the Ba'th regime for over a decade.¹⁴¹ As a result, the infrastructure in Iraqi Kurdistan was not destroyed during the invasion, nor did it face the same power-vacuum or explosion of violence which challenged southern Iraq during the occupation.¹⁴²

Despite their more stable environment, during the occupation women in Iraqi Kurdistan faced gender-specific challenges, many of which were on the institutional level. On the one hand, women's civil society was well established by 2003, and, unlike in the South, Kurdish women activists did not have to battle the social conservatism enabled by Saddam Hussein's tribo-Islamic policies of the 1990s.¹⁴³ On the other hand, Kurdish women still dealt with

¹³⁷ Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 140.

¹³⁸ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 78-80.

¹³⁹ Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 139.

¹⁴⁰ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 79.

¹⁴¹ Tripp, *Iraq*, 248-9; 309.

¹⁴² Ibid., 248-9; 309.

¹⁴³ Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 222.

institutional and patriarchal violence enabled by the KRG. The political establishment in the KRG was supported by a large conservative base, and therefore it failed to offer women protections against gender-based violence committed in response to suspected moral transgressions like adultery. Unfortunately for women, the leaders of the KRG cemented their power through the cabinet positions and authority won in the new Iraqi government.¹⁴⁴

During the US occupation, women from the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan to the southernmost port of Basra were affected by imperial, institutional, and patriarchal violence. Whether it was “shock therapy” economics, the repeal of women’s legal protections, or men empowered by the failing state, it is safe to say that no Iraqi woman was left unaffected. However, Iraqi women did not passively accept this violence. They found ways to survive and resist. It is to their voices that I now turn.

(3) Iraqi Women’s Resistance: Adaptations and Developments

“‘Please dress appropriately next time you come here.’ The man said to me. I looked down at what I was wearing—black pants, a beige high necked sweater and a knee length black coat. Huh?” This quote from Riverbend’s blog demonstrates the subversive power Iraqi women had at their disposal every time they left the house. However, it also demonstrates the increasingly patriarchal and controlling environments that Iraqi women found themselves in during the occupation. As Riverbend notes when recalling this interaction, her dress did not affect only herself, but also the male relative she had to travel with to appear in public. If the situation escalated, “there might be an exchange of ugly words or a fight and probably, after that, a detention in Abu Ghraib.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 107-8.

¹⁴⁵ Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning II: More Girl Blog From Iraq*, (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2006), 54-5.

Feminist scholarship on conflict in the Middle East argues for the inclusion of everyday acts such as dress when discussing women's resistance. Maria Holt and Haifa Jawad, in *Women, Islam, and Resistance in the Arab World*, discuss women's resistance in times of social upheaval. They stress that it is important to take into account forms of resistance that occur as a part of women's everyday lives, because, amidst great conflict and social restriction, resistance on a larger scale is often unavailable to women in the Middle East.¹⁴⁶ On the other hand, the fall of the Ba'ath regime, a one-party state, created new possibilities for women's political mobilizations. Sociologist Zahra Ali argues that, since 2003, Iraqi women have acted out resistance in more overt ways by fighting to retain their legal rights, the right to security, and the right to live a dignified life.¹⁴⁷ I build on these points below, beginning with survival and resistance as a part of women's everyday lives.

Economic Survival

A range of factors led hundreds of thousands of Iraqis to leave the country during the Occupation, and for many Iraqi women it was a matter of life-and-death. In the face of violent economic policies by the coalition, this became an act of resistance. As discussed above, occupation ushered in even worse economic conditions than were seen during the UN embargo. The barriers to employment for women were often too great to overcome. With the Iraqi state decentralized, courtesy of the US, social control by male relatives kept many women from working outside the home.¹⁴⁸ Even if they were allowed to work, there was little chance of finding stable employment, as the coalition's economic policies decimated Iraq's economy, and

¹⁴⁶ Maria Holt and Haifa Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance in the Middle East*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013), 5-7.

¹⁴⁷ Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 292.

¹⁴⁸ "Women's Economic Empowerment: Integrating Women into the Iraqi Economy," *UNDP Iraq*, April 9, 2013: 20-2.

its efforts to rebuild the industry it destroyed during the invasion were dismal. Violence from militias also caused many Iraqi women to flee the country, especially during the civil war of 2006-2007. Fleeing car bombs, death threats, and poverty, many Iraqi women made their way to Jordan, where the increasing number of refugees made it increasingly difficult to obtain legal status as such.¹⁴⁹ Without the proper documentation, many women had to find employment in the informal economy.

Many women in Jordan survived through selling goods on the “black market.” A 2007 report from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs says the amount of black market activity by Iraqis, who willing to accept low pay and bad working conditions, was making it difficult for Jordanians to find employment.¹⁵⁰ Soha Hasan is an Iraqi widow who says she came to Jordan to find work because her family in Iraq couldn’t find any. She spends her days working as a street vendor, something that would be incredibly dangerous in Iraq because of the security situation. On her work, Soha says, “the cigarettes we deal with are smuggle[d], so they are tax-free, so [customs] can take [or confiscate] them. And this is how life goes on.”¹⁵¹ Soha fled the violent economic conditions in Iraq, refusing to bow to a globalized economic system that was meant to keep her impoverished. In Jordan, despite lacking refugee status, she found a way to make a profit through the black market.

For the women who stayed in Iraq, surviving meant being practical about where you earned money. Ansom A., interviewed as a part of the *Iraqi Women Refugees* oral history

¹⁴⁹ “Failed Responsibility: Iraqi Refugees in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon,” *International Crisis Group*, July 10, 2008: 8. Available online at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/failed-responsibility-iraqi-refugees-syria-jordan-and-lebanon>.

¹⁵⁰ “Iraqis Cause Black Market For Jobs,” *The New Humanitarian*, January 23, 2007, accessed January 23, 2020, <http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/report/71004/iraq-jordan-iraqis-cause-black-market-jobs>.

¹⁵¹ Laura Hamblin, “Soha Mehzen Hasan Transcript,” trans. Hala al-Sarraf, *Iraqi Women Refugees*, November 29, 2007.

project, was left in an incredibly vulnerable position after her entire family was killed during the siege of Baghdad in 2003. Soon thereafter, Ansom was forcibly evicted by her landlord. In the middle of the night she collected her things and climbed into a cab:

the taxi driver was driving me around, and I was thinking I wanted to go home, at time. And it was scary and we have curfew, and you have to make sure you are not going somewhere that you get shot... I was looking for, for nothing—I don't know where to go. And I was passing from the hotel in Baghdad, and they put signs in the door saying they need someone who can speak English.¹⁵²

Ansom had no other options, so she went inside and quickly had a job as an interpreter for the US military.¹⁵³

Despite entering this line of work through circumstances outside of her control, and pressures to act passively within the job, Ansom was able to make her work meaningful. She spent four years in and around Fallujah— the site of two major military operations by the US— in which she was able to do work translating with a women's organization (in the context of her employment by the US military).

I used to work in a program, which is IWE (Iraqi Women Engagement). And we used to go out and help women with their issues, health issues and, you know; we educate them... I think we did a good job with the women. I think so. Because, now Fallujah is very, it's a good place. And women, they are ok.¹⁵⁴

Ansom's view on what happened in Fallujah seems to have been shaped by her association with the coalition forces, as about a quarter of the city was destroyed, and it was readily described as "unlivable" after the second battle in 2004.¹⁵⁵ However, Ansom's ability to find meaningful work assisting less fortunate Iraqi women in the context of her employment as an interpreter during the occupation shows the complexity of economic resistance during the occupation.

¹⁵² Hamblin, "Ansom A. Transcript," *Iraqi Women Refugees*. Interview (in English). http://www.iraqiwomenrefugees.com/?page_id=104.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Hamblin, "Ansom A. Transcript."

¹⁵⁵ Schwartz, *War Without End*, 112.

While the occupation shaped the means of resistance available to Iraqi women, many found ways to express agency through their work or simply by staying alive. Women in more privileged positions were able to go further, committing themselves to

Political Resistance

The lives of Iraqi women underwent dramatic changes as a result of the US occupation, as did their political resistance. No longer living under a one-party state, Iraqi women began engaging in civil society. The Iraqi women's rights movement, which had been limited to operating as a part of the Ba'ath regime since 1968, began to flourish once again.¹⁵⁶ In addition, the internet provided new outlets with which Iraqi women could elevate their stories. In the next few pages I examine a Kurdish Women's NGO which formed after the occupation, then I turn to the individual story of an Arab Iraqi women's rights activist, and finally I discuss Riverbend's blog and its conversation with imperialist rhetoric and patriarchal laws. Through these examples I hope to demonstrate that Iraqi women's resistance often looked beyond ethnic and sectarian divisions.

The programming by Women's NGOs varied widely during the Occupation, and some were more politicized than others, but many rose above ethnosectarian tensions to deliver relief to struggling Iraqi women. Asuda, a women's NGO based in Iraqi Kurdistan, is an illustrative example of this. The mission of Asuda was and remains to reduce gender-based violence throughout all of Iraq, and it does so through offering shelter, legal aid, and literacy and sewing classes to women at risk.¹⁵⁷ We can get a glimpse of the type of shelters run by organizations like Asuda through the eyes of white American journalist Mark Lattimer, who wrote a piece on it for

¹⁵⁶ Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 113-15.

¹⁵⁷ "Kurdish Women Activists Push for Change," *VOA News*, October 31, 2009, accessed January 2, 2020. <https://www.voanews.com/archive/kurdish-women-activists-push-change>.

The Guardian in 2007, the height of the Sectarian War. Despite his inherent biases, his article provides a useful account of these shelters in the absence of descriptions by Iraqi women themselves. Lattimer recalls entering a small unmarked building and making his way to the attic through a secret staircase disguised as a broom closet. The windows were high, and mattresses were piled in the corner, where they would remain until nightfall. The space was big enough to house around 20 women, who escaped abusive marriages and militia violence as close as a nearby town and as far away as Iraq's southernmost port of Basra.¹⁵⁸

The women who run these shelters are in near as much danger as the women who reside in them. Solaf, who spoke with Lattimer under a pseudonym, tells Lattimer that she is used to receiving threats because of her work. She is tasked with negotiating with the families of the women who take refuge at Asuda's shelter, and she tries to reach agreements so that women can return safely home.¹⁵⁹ However, if a case cannot be resolved through negotiations, it goes to Khamis Latif, Asuda's director, and a team of lawyers who work with Asuda to take legal action. Despite working in a corrupt system, Latif has gone on record saying that Asuda is usually successful in resolving the domestic problems of women who end up in their care.

Asuda seems to have resisted any attempts to change their agenda by foreign donors. Much of Asuda's funding seems to come from the UN and charitable organizations based in Europe. This was true as of 2017, which is the oldest financial data I can find from Asuda.¹⁶⁰ If the same was true in 2007, it may explain Mark Lattimer's interest in the organization. It would also be to the credit of Asuda for sticking to their purpose of providing direct relief. The scholarship on Iraqi women's NGOs suggests that this was not an easy task, as many NGOs had

¹⁵⁸ Mark Lattimer, "Freedom Lost," *The Guardian*, December 13, 2007, accessed January 10, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/dec/13/gender.iraq>.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ "Asuda: Donors," *ASUDA— Empowering Women to Lead*, 2017. <https://asuda.krd/category/partners/donors/>.

their agenda shaped by international donors who wanted them to provide “democracy training” rather than direct assistance to Iraqi women in need.¹⁶¹

Iraqi women had to resist local patriarchal forces and random violence which characterized the occupation at the same time as they resisted the corruption and institutional violence of the new Iraq state. Inthessar, an Iraqi woman activist based in the Southern city of Basra, provides an example of how Iraqi women did just that. She told her story during an interview conducted and translated by the International Catalan Institute for Peace (ICIP); a governmental organization founded in 2007 by the Catalan regional government of Spain. In her work during the years following the invasion she organized around ending domestic violence. She recalls organizing to change articles of the new constitution that would weaken women’s legal rights and traveling to attend workshops with international organizations like Amnesty International the UN. This caught the attention of a local militia:

[I] started to receive threats because of my work with these organizations, and it became abnormal, like receiving threats by SMS. They said, “don’t go out and work,” or “don’t talk about this subject, leave the work, there is no work, no travelling, no courses [allowed].” I never answered and kept working and one day they bombed our house. After that they kept threatening but we never left the house. The government did nothing, no police, no security. I stayed home for 20 days but I have internet and organizations came to the house... So I started to work from home and everybody thought I left, but I was working at home and never stopped organizing... after that [20 days was over] I went out again.¹⁶²

The ethnographic research done by Zahra Ali indicates that Inthessar’s story is not uncommon. While some women activists were forced to leave the country, many made strategic changes to

¹⁶¹ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 146-7; Z. Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 172-3, 190.

¹⁶² “6.-Women in Najaf,” YouTube, February 18, 2010, originally published February 15, 2010 by ICIP, <https://youtu.be/SWxBWNKl-dI>.

their behavior which allowed them to continue working, such as moving to an area where they would not be attacked because of their religious sect.¹⁶³

Iraqi women also took political action through the internet. The new technology of the 2000s made reaching a large audience through one's writing possible without a book deal. Some economically privileged Iraqi women used the growing popularity of blogs to call attention to the gendered impacts of the occupation. I will use Riverbend, a woman from Baghdad who began blogging just after the invasion, as a case study for this. The existence of Riverbend's blog suggests she is from a middle-class background because it means she had frequent access to a computer and the internet. She also posts about losing her job in software development after the occupation began,¹⁶⁴ again suggesting a middle-class background simply by virtue of the fact that she had a job before 2003. Riverbend never specifies her ethnicity, which leads me to believe that she is Arab because this is the largest ethnic group in Baghdad. As for her target audience, her use of English and posts such as "American Elections 2004," in which Riverbend pleads with US voters not to re-elect George W. Bush, lead me to believe that she was writing to politically informed US citizens.¹⁶⁵

Riverbend resisted the occupation through pointing out the corruption of the Occupying forces and the new government they were installing. In a post from September 2003, she discusses the ways in which Iraq's resources and industry were being looted by Americans, the formerly exiled Iraqis placed in power by the US-led coalition (who she refers to as "puppets,") and foreign investors more generally. Riverbend goes as far as to say that the entire country is "for sale" on the condition that the buyer is an American or British corporation. She continues:

¹⁶³ Zahra Ali, "Women's political activism in Iraq: Caught between NGOization and the struggle for a civil state," in *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 12, no. 1, (2018): 39.

¹⁶⁴ Riverbend, "Will Work For Food..." in *Baghdad Burning*, 21-25.

¹⁶⁵ Riverbend, "American Elections 2004," in *Baghdad Burning II*, 10-13.

To hear of the first of the economic reforms announced by Kamil Al-Gaylani, the new Iraqi Finance Minister, you'd think Iraq was a Utopia and the economy was perfect only lacking in... foreign investment. As the BBC so wonderfully summarized it: the sale of all state industries except for oil and other natural resources. Basically, that means the privatization of water, electricity, communications, transportation, health... The BBC calls it a "surprise"... why were we not surprised?¹⁶⁶

Riverbend makes an important contribution to the contemporary coverage of the occupation by challenging the narratives dominant in Western media, saying she is not surprised by the privatization. She also calls her readers' attention to some of the most imperialistic policies pursued by coalition leader Paul Bremer III and the US government by extension. The first is the amount of money that went to US companies to rebuild infrastructure in Iraq, second is privatization and rapidly opening the Iraqi economy to foreign investment. These economic policies impoverished many Iraqis, and especially women heads of households.¹⁶⁷ Riverbend resisted the occupation's corruption and imperialistic practices by calling her US audience's attention to them.

Riverbend also urged her readers to consider the gendered impacts of the occupation and the new Iraqi government. In a post from January 2004, titled "Shari'a and Family Law," Riverbend breaks down the implications of Resolution 137, a bill passed by the IGC in December 2003 which was the predecessor to Article 41 of the 2005 constitution. Resolution 137 would have fully replaced Iraq's the PSC from 1959, which remained one of the most progressive in the region through its considerable legal protections for women. Like Article 41, Resolution 137's PSC would have been more sectarian and decentralized than the former,

¹⁶⁶ Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog From Iraq*, 76-7. The first and last set of ellipses are Riverbend's, the middle is my own.

¹⁶⁷ Schwartz, *War Without End*, 39-42; "Integrating Women into the Iraqi Economy," *UNDP*, 11.

allowing local leaders to grant women whichever rights they felt were appropriate based on their personal interpretation of Shari'a, or Islamic law.¹⁶⁸ Here is what Riverbend had to say:

The news [of this resolution] has barely been covered by Western or even Arab media... This latest decision is going to be catastrophic for females– we're going backwards. Don't get me wrong– pure Islamic law according to the Quran and the Prophet gives women certain unalterable, nonnegotiable rights. The problem arises when certain clerics decide to do their own interpretations of these laws (and just about *anyone* can make themselves a cleric these days)... This is going to mean more chaos than we already have to deal with. We've come to expect chaos in the streets... but chaos in the courts and judicial system too?¹⁶⁹

By mentioning the lack of coverage Riverbend makes her intervention clear– she means to raise her readers' awareness of this issue. She does so with considerable skill, not assuming any knowledge of Islam, Iraqi society, or Iraqi history. Through accessible language Riverbend makes her position easy to understand, and the passion which permeates her writing is an appeal to the hearts of her audience. She also explicitly notes the lack of coverage by Western or Arab media, prompting her readers to consider the bias of their news sources. Through blog posts like this, Riverbend resisted state oppression and imperialism in the form of biased media coverage. She was one of many Iraqi women who adapted to the rapidly changing circumstances during the US occupation, and part of a shift that took place among Iraqi women's resistance.

Conclusion

During the US occupation, Iraqi women took resistance methods seen during the Sanctions Period, adapted them to the present circumstances, and even innovated new forms of resistance. Impoverished Iraqi women were more likely to take their survival tactics beyond Iraq's borders. The end of a one-party system left women free to take their political activism

¹⁶⁸ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 133-4.

¹⁶⁹ Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning*, 187-8 (the first two ellipses are my own, the last set is Riverbend's). I should add that, due to the mass mobilization of Iraqi women activists, this bill was not passed into law: Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq*, 228.

outside the control of the government, and new technology gave some Iraqi women the ability to write their resistance through blogs. Unfortunately, among this adaptation and innovation, a more extreme form of violence was taking root in Iraq. In the next chapter I will turn to the extremist violence perpetrated by ISIL and discuss the ways Iraqi women changed their resistance methods to survive.

Chapter 3:

Hyper-Patriarchy and Violence Under ISIL

(2012-2019)

It was August 3, 2014, two months after ISIL,¹⁷⁰ or the so-called “Islamic State,” captured Mosul, one of the largest cities in Iraq. Adiba Qasim and her family were asleep on the roof of their house to avoid the summer heat, a standard practice among many Iraqi families. Adiba and her family awoke to a call from one of their relatives, who delivered an urgent message: “the Islamic State at 3:00 in the morning attacked us. Many people have been killed and it is very difficult. So, run away. Get out of your house!”¹⁷¹ Adiba’s father was resistant, but she forced him and the rest of her family into a car, and they managed to leave town before ISIL arrived. It was the last time Adiba would step foot in her childhood home. She lost up to 70 members of her extended family in ISIL’s genocide of Iraq’s Yezidi population.¹⁷²

ISIL’s military campaign in the summer of 2014 shocked the world and exposed the frailty of the post-2003 Iraqi regime. Adiba Qasim’s life has been extremely difficult since that summer, and yet, in her words, she was one of the lucky ones. ISIL used discredited extremist interpretations of Sunni Islam to justify crimes against humanity, and it brought death and destruction to the areas it controlled. Unlike its predecessor, al-Qaeda, which was a decentralized organization with a focus on attacking imperialist nations like the United States, ISIL constructed

¹⁷⁰ There are many names associated with this group, including its Arabic acronym, Daesh, and its most popular acronym, ISIS. To make this paper both as accurate and accessible as possible, I have chosen to use ISIL because it is likely more familiar to my readers than “Daesh,” and the translation “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” is more accurate than “Iraq and Syria.” This is because the Arabic word “al-Shams” refers not to Syria the nation-state, but Syria as a region, or what we call the “Levant” in English.

¹⁷¹ Adiba Qasim, “Home Is the People Around You,” interview by Melissa Fleming, *UN Refugee Agency*, August 19, 2019. Accessed January 11, 2020. <https://www.unhcr.org/awakeatnight/season-2-episode-7-adiba-qasim/>.

¹⁷² Jane Ferguson, “Yazidi women struggle to return to daily life after enduring Islamic State brutality,” *PBS*, December 18, 2017, accessed March 12, 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/yazidi-women-struggle-to-return-to-daily-life-after-enduring-islamic-state-brutality>.

an organized, hierarchical military and system of governance.¹⁷³ Its main target was not the US or other imperialist nations, but the “near-enemy” which meant Shi’a Muslims, religious minorities such as Christians, Sabeans, and Yezidis, and even Sunni Muslims who did not adhere to ISIL’s twisted vision of Islam.¹⁷⁴

Women of non-Muslim religious minorities, like Adiba, were subject to the worst of ISIL’s violence, and for that reason they are the most visible in this chapter. The sexual violence weaponized against them, however, was not a new phenomenon in Iraq. As noted by Nadjé al-Ali, it was not uncommon for the Ba’th regime to use sexual violence to assert its masculinity and control over various Iraqi communities during times of war and peace. During the US occupation, gender-based violence was institutionalized by occupiers and occupied alike. ISIL’s divergence was in its ideological justification of rape and forced marriage, and its openness in tying these practices to its ideas of masculinity and what al-Ali calls “a hyper-patriarchal system of rigid and polarized gender roles.”¹⁷⁵

The goal of this chapter is to contextualize the rise of ISIL in Iraq and Syria, examine its religious philosophy towards women, and discuss the survival tactics used by Iraqi women living under ISIL and the ways other Iraqi women resisted ISIL. I begin by traveling back to the months leading up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and I argue that the United States and the new Iraqi political elite contributed to the conditions necessary for ISIL to appear and build a proto-state in 2014 and share responsibility for its emergence. The following section deals with ISIL’s religious doctrine, and how that informed its treatment of women. I argue that ISIL’s religious

¹⁷³ Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of the Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*, (New York: Verso, 2015), 55)

¹⁷⁴ Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 23-5.

¹⁷⁵ Nadjé al-Ali, “Sexual violence in Iraq: Challenges for transnational feminist politics,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 25, no. 1 (2018): 21

ruling legalized rape and forced marriage and were intended to create a hyper-patriarchal society in which women had little to no freedoms. In the final sections I examine the ways Iraqi women resisted and survived ISIL's violence. Some women adapted forms of resistance seen in previous chapters, such as writing and activism, to be effective against ISIL. Others took the newer path of military resistance. Iraqi women subjected to the worst of ISIL's violence resisted through finding ways to survive, reduce the likelihood of rape and forced marriage, and escape captivity.

(1) Creating ISIL: US Imperialism and Iraqi Corruption

While it may seem like this chapter is somewhat divergent from the previous two, which focused on US imperialism and the Iraqi state, the truth is that ISIL could not have formed without the US occupation, or the sectarian policies of the Iraqi government that the US left behind. The purpose of this section is to show how the US occupation gave al-Qaeda Iraq, ISIL's predecessor, the opportunity to form, and how the US radicalized many of ISIL's future leaders. I then argue Iraq's sectarian government alienated its Sunni population, some of which ISIL temporarily allied itself with in order to take power in 2014. This is the first section of this thesis in which Iraqi women do not take a prominent role, though I believe it is important to include this history for the sake of continuity. Therefore, before we discuss Iraqi women in the 2010s, we need to look at the life of a Jordanian man born in the 1960s.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was able to found al-Qaeda Iraq (AQI) because of the collapse of the Iraqi state after the US invasion in 2003. Zarqawi was born in Jordan in 1966 and converted to the radical and fundamentalist Salafi-Jihadist brand of Sunni Islam as a teenager. In 1999 he gained the monetary support of al-Qaeda Central (AQC) and created Jihadist training camps in

Iran.¹⁷⁶ In February 2003, then Secretary of State Collin Powell justified the invasion of Iraq in part through a claim that Zarqawi and al-Qaeda were being harbored in Northern Iraq and even Baghdad.¹⁷⁷ However, Zarqawi moved to Iraq for the first time in June 2003, three months after the US invasion.¹⁷⁸ Political scientist Fawaz Gerges has called the US invasion the “most important variable in the emergence of [AQI] and its subsequent rebirth as [ISIL].”¹⁷⁹ This is due to the US dismantling Iraq’s state institutions, the dismissal of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi soldiers, and the institutionalization of sectarian politics.¹⁸⁰ AQI used the chaos immediately following the US invasion to its advantage, and over the next decade it would recruit Iraqi men radicalized by the US occupation.

The United States contributed to the radicalization of what would later become ISIL’s leaders through torture and abuse in the prisons it ran in Iraq. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIL until his death in October 2019, and his top military strategists all spent time in US-run prisons during the Occupation.¹⁸¹ Al-Baghdadi’s biography is difficult to piece together, but scholars agree that he did not become a Salafi-Jihadist until he went to the US-run Camp Bucca around 2004 or 2005.¹⁸² A report from the International Committee of the Red Cross describes standard practices in Camp Bucca, saying a regular day involved prolonged isolation while hooded, and “interrogation” tactics included being left in a stress position for several hours, and

¹⁷⁶ Mary Anne Weaver, “The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi,” *The Atlantic*, (July/August 2006). https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/?utm_source=share&utm_campaign=share; Gerges, *ISIS*, 52-60.

¹⁷⁷ Colin Powell, “Remarks to the UN Security Council,” February 5, 2003, accessed April 14, 2020, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2003/17300.htm>.

¹⁷⁸ Weaver, “Zarqawi”.

¹⁷⁹ Gerges, *ISIS*, 63.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

¹⁸¹ Gerges, *ISIS*, 132-3.

¹⁸² Cockburn, *Islamic State*, 44.

other forms torture.¹⁸³ It was not uncommon for men like al-Baghdadi or former Ba‘thist military officers to join AQI after leaving US-run prisons such as Camp Bucca, as they were often converted to Salafi-Jihadism while detained.¹⁸⁴

Al-Baghdadi joined AQI around 2006, around the same time that Zarqawi was killed by a US airstrike and AQI fell out of favor among Sunni communities.¹⁸⁵ When al-Baghdadi became the leader of AQI in 2010, it was at its weakest since Zarqawi founded it in 2004, but sectarian Iraqi politics and a proxy war in Syria allowed AQI to re-emerge as ISIL in 2013. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was elected in 2006, and his increasingly authoritarian and sectarian policies alienated Iraq’s Sunni constituency to the point that many saw armed resistance as their only viable option. For example, in 2010 al-Maliki barred 511 politicians, mostly Sunni men, from participating in that year’s election. After losing the election, al-Maliki blamed a Ba‘thist plot to re-take the country, and formed a government anyway.¹⁸⁶ In the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring, Iraqis all over the country joined in anti-government protests, and a new insurgency formed in the Northeast.¹⁸⁷ This area of Iraq has a Sunni majority, and shares a border with Syria.

AQI took advantage of the unrest in Iraq and Syria by becoming temporary allies with less radical militias and even Gulf states like Qatar and Saudi Arabia. After a period of peaceful protests against Syria’s secular dictator who belongs to a Shi’i sub-sect of Islam, the Syrian civil war began in 2011 as a fight between a corrupt regime and its constituency, though foreign

¹⁸³ “Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on the treatment by the coalition forces of the prisoners of war and other protected persons by the Geneva conventions in Iraq during arrest, internment, and interrogation,” *International Committee of the Red Cross*, February 2004.

¹⁸⁴ Gerges, *ISIS*, 132-3.

¹⁸⁵ Cockburn, *Islamic State*, 42; Gerges *ISIS*, 104, 132. Al-Qaeda Iraq was actually named the Islamic State of Iraq until it expanded into Syria, but for the sake of brevity and clarity I have chosen not to include this in the main text.

¹⁸⁶ Gerges, *ISIS*, 111-13; Rod Nordland, “Maliki Contests the Result of Iraq Vote,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2010, accessed March 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/28/world/middleeast/28iraq.html>.

¹⁸⁷ Cockburn, *Islamic State*, 62-3.

intervention soon led to a proxy war involving several regional and global powers.¹⁸⁸ AQI invested heavily in a Jihadi group fighting in Syria, and eventually absorbed it, establishing itself as ISIL in 2013. ISIL became especially powerful during in 2013 through the arms and financial support it received from Sunni-majority countries that wanted to see the fall of Syria's Shi'a government. It used this power to win influence over the insurgency in Northeastern Iraq, and by 2014 ISIL was prepared for a major military campaign.

In January 2014 ISIL took control of Fallujah, a city just forty miles West of Baghdad.¹⁸⁹ By the summer, a small army of ISIL fighters had taken the city of Mosul, one of Iraq's largest cities. They also took Tikrit, Samarra, Ramadi, and Baquba that summer, all of which are Sunni-majority cities in Western Iraq or near Baghdad. ISIL pushed into Kurdish territory in the North, though it never took any major cities official designated as part of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Amidst this chaos, the Iraqi government was frozen by ethnosectarian grudges and incompetence. Generals were airlifted to safety in Baghdad, and the Iraqi army disintegrated, leaving behind weapons, equipment, and large swathes of territory for ISIL.¹⁹⁰

As noted in Chapter 2, it is common for "occupied" men to feel emasculated and humiliated by the violence of occupation. They often reassert their masculinity through control over, or violence against, "occupied" women.¹⁹¹ Given the torture they experienced at prisons like Camp Bucca, one can imagine men like al-Baghdadi and former Ba'athist military officers becoming extremely violent towards women in order to cope with their experiences at US-run

¹⁸⁸ Cockburn, *Islamic State*, 83.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 1.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 11-8.

¹⁹¹ Christine de Matos and Rowena Ward, "Analyzing Gendered Occupation Power," in *Gender, Power, and Military Occupations: Asia Pacific and the Middle East Since 1945*, ed. Christine de Matos and Rowena Ward (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1-7.

prisons. ISIL's publications and religious rulings suggest its leaders, military and religious, all encouraged violence against women and hyper-patriarchal practices.



Iraqi territory as of May 2015, after some areas were recaptured by Iraqi and Kurdish forces.¹⁹²

(2) “Girls get peddled like barrels of petrol”: ISIL and Women

One of the most disturbing aspects of ISIL is how organized they were during the height of their power. There was no improvisation. All of their policies originated from their faulty interpretations of the Qur'an and were intended to mimic life under the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁹³ This was also true in regard to women. In this section I will examine ISIL documents which illustrate their views of what a woman *should* be, and how to treat a woman who does not

¹⁹² “War in Iraq: Map of Islamic State Control in May 2015,” *Political Geography Now*, May 22, 2015, accessed April 5, 2020, <https://www.polgeonow.com/2015/05/war-in-iraq-map-of-islamic-state.html>.

¹⁹³ Gerges, *ISIS*, 26-7.

conform to that standard. I then turn to their policies as they were implemented, and the way women were governed under ISIL.

In the official English magazine of ISIL, *Dabiq*, an article from 2014 explains ISIL's position on the enslavement of minority women. *Dabiq* propaganda and recruitment tool designed to make ISIL fighters look glorious, and their enemies weak and perverted. In issue 4, the cover article is titled "the Revival of Slavery Before the Hour." It deals especially with the Yezidi Kurds, practitioners of a religion that predates Islam, whom they call "devil worshippers." They argue that because Yezidi women do not practice an Abrahamic religion, they are subject to enslavement.¹⁹⁴ They quote commentary written by Salafi scholars, for example "Allah marvels at people who enter Jannah [heaven] in chains,"¹⁹⁵ which is supposed to mean that by enslaving non-believers and forcing them to convert, the ISIL fighter secures them a spot in heaven. Through quotations such as these, ISIL argues that they are, in fact, helping Yezidi women.

Women enslaved by ISIL were forcibly married to ISIL fighters, and subject to rape and torture. An ISIL pamphlet discussing the rules and treatment of enslaved women was published on a pro-ISIL twitter account, and later confirmed as authentic by Human Rights Watch, says the following:

If she is a virgin, he [her master] can have intercourse with her immediately after taking possession of her. However, if she isn't, her uterus must be purified.... It is permissible to buy, sell, or give as a gift female captives and slaves, for they are merely property, which can be disposed of as long as that doesn't cause [the Muslim ummah] any harm or damage.... It is permissible to beat the female slave as a *darb ta'deeb* [disciplinary beating].¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ It should be noted that Christians, despite being an Abrahamic religion, were (and are) also subject to sexual enslavement by ISIL, demonstrating that, in practice, they are more interested in power and terror than ideological rigidity. Gerges, *ISIS*, 32. This doesn't need to be a footnote.

¹⁹⁵ "The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour," in *Dabiq* 4, (Al Hayat Media Center, 2014): 14-5.

¹⁹⁶ Kenneth Roth, "Slavery: The ISIS Rules," *Human Rights Watch*, September 5, 2015, accessed March 11, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/05/slavery-isis-rules>. Brackets from Human Rights Watch.

This pamphlet perfectly summarizes ISIL's view of women who don't conform to their expectations: objects to be bought, used, and sold. In a pricing guide discovered by UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict Zainab Bangura, ISIL recommends girls under age nine be sold for \$165, girls between ten and nineteen for \$124, and women over twenty for even less.¹⁹⁷ Disturbingly, sexual slavery served as an extremely effective recruitment tool for ISIL during the height of its power, especially for young men from conservative backgrounds.¹⁹⁸

While ISIL used its religious doctrine to justify violence, sexual and otherwise, against non-Muslim religious minorities, its rank-and-file did not differentiate between religious or ethnic sects. Sunni Arab women, the only ethnosectarian group not considered heretical by ISIL, were also subject to forced marriage and rape by ISIL soldiers. Human Rights Watch interviewed several Sunni Arab women who had lived under ISIL for either several weeks or months, of whom

[one] woman said an ISIS fighter, her cousin, forced her to marry him and then raped her. [Another] woman said that ISIS fighters destroyed her home as punishment after her husband escaped ISIS and tried to forcibly marry her. Five of the six women said that ISIS fighters beat them.¹⁹⁹

While these women were not sold into sexual slavery like Yezidi women, they were victims of similar forms of sexual violence by ISIL. The fact that this was true for Sunni women, who were closest to ISIL's religious views, suggests all Iraqi women living

¹⁹⁷ Doug Bolton, "Isis 'price list' for child slaves confirmed as authentic by UN official Zainab Bangura" *Independent*, August 4, 2015, accessed March 12, 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-price-list-for-child-slaves-confirmed-as-genuine-by-un-official-zainab-bangura-10437348.html>.

¹⁹⁸ Gerges, *ISIS*, 31.

¹⁹⁹ "Iraq: Sunni Women Tell of ISIS Detention, Torture," *Human Rights Watch*, February 20, 2017, accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/20/iraq-sunni-women-tell-isis-detention-torture>.

under ISIL were at risk of enduring traumatizing violence. It also suggests ISIL cared more about political power than religious sect.²⁰⁰

In addition to sexual violence, Iraqi women who lived in areas captured by ISIL, such as the city of Mosul, were subject to other forms of violence such as lack of food and healthcare. In the 2015-16 growing season, the agricultural land surrounding Mosul saw a 18% decrease in harvest output.²⁰¹ This is reflected by an anonymous Mosulawi woman, who told the UN Population Fund, “when ISIL fighters came to our town, they stayed for two years. We faced hunger and lack of medicines.”²⁰² As noted by this woman, healthcare was also a problem. When ISIL captured Mosul in 2014, they burned down al-Khansa hospital and closed most of the cities maternity wards.²⁰³ ISIL’s restrictions on unmarried women and men touching and being alone together meant some doctors would not see women patients for fear of punishment.²⁰⁴ For many of the women who escaped ISIL territory, violence against them continued in other forms, like being placed in a refugee camp where they could not leave to seek medical attention,²⁰⁵ or being tricked into interviews with insensitive foreign journalists.²⁰⁶

Women who lived under ISIL, including women who supported it, had to follow hyper-patriarchal rules that placed them under the complete control of men. It was forbidden for a

²⁰⁰ The violence against Yazidi women was particularly brutal, and part of a genocidal campaign. I do not wish to belittle this fact. The point of this paragraph is not to argue that all Iraqi women were treated the same by ISIL, it is to demonstrate that ISIL’s violence against women knew no boundaries.

²⁰¹ “Mosul: ISIL’s Economic Engine.” *RAND National Security Research Division*, accessed February 28, 2020, <https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/when-isil-comes-to-town/case-studies/mosul.html>.

²⁰² “Reaching women in Mosul, where the shadow of conflict still lingers,” *UNFPA*, February 7, 2019, accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/reaching-women-mosul-where-shadow-conflict-still-lingers>.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ “Iraq: Women Suffer Under ISIS,” *Human Rights Watch*, April 5, 2016, accessed April 4, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/05/iraq-women-suffer-under-isis>.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Al-Ali, “Sexual Violence,” 22.

woman to be unmarried because, by ISIL's worldview, an unmarried woman who is not having children is not doing her part to further the cause of the Jihad. Women widowed by ISIL fighters had new marriages arranged by ISIL's marriage bureau.²⁰⁷ This kept them firmly under the control of their husband, who had the legal and religious right to beat her whenever he felt necessary, as mentioned above. In addition, women were not allowed to travel anywhere without a male companion, usually her husband or someone in her immediate family.²⁰⁸ These restrictions kept women from acting autonomously, and demonstrate that ISIL sought to make all women subordinates, regardless of their allegiance. With ISIL's rise to power and its treatment of women established, let us turn to the voices of the Iraqi women who resisted ISIL's violence.

(3) Iraqi Women Resisting ISIL: From Humanitarian Work to Armed Resistance

Adiba Qasim was born in 1993 to a Yezidi family in a village near the Syrian border. Adiba's birth was not recognized by the Iraqi state because her mother was still officially married to her first husband, who died in the Iran-Iraq war. She attended school from outside a window, listening in on lessons and borrowing schoolbooks from her friends. Eventually, she was recognized as an Iraqi citizen, and in 2013 she passed the entrance exams to a university in Mosul.²⁰⁹ Adiba was able to make the best of an unfortunate situation through her resourcefulness and ingenuity. The violence perpetrated by ISIL was a much more extreme situation in which Adiba once again called upon her resourcefulness and ingenuity to resist, and many Iraqi women like her did the same. In this section I will argue that Iraqi women resisted ISIL through their activism, writing, and militancy, a form of resistance unique to this decade.

²⁰⁷ Al-Ali, "Sexual Violence," 130.

²⁰⁸ "Fatwa number: 45" *The Committee on Research and Fatwa Issue*, ISIL, December 18, 2014.

²⁰⁹ Qasim, "Home."

Adiba began resisting ISIL first by learning English almost as soon as the crisis began in 2014. Adiba and her family were fortunate to escape ISIL's grasp and resettle at a refugee camp in Turkey. Upon arrival, she noticed that very few people were able to translate Kurmanji, the dialect spoken by most Yezidis, to English, the language spoken by most of the NGO workers and journalists at the refugee camp. She also noticed that many of the women at the camp seemed to be more distressed after meeting with NGO workers and journalists than they had been before. "I decided to learn English so I could work with women [who escaped ISIL]"²¹⁰ Adiba told Al-Jazeera. At first she followed around an NGO worker, picking up on English words here and there, even using scraps of paper and cigarette cartons to practice reading and writing in English. She worked hard and her English improved at a rapid pace.²¹¹

At first, Adiba used her English to help elevate the stories of Yezidi women. Speaking to her motivations, Adiba said, "I was lucky; I escaped, but it could have been me who was raped or tortured like many Yezidi women, and I feel a responsibility to tell their stories."²¹² Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot has said silences enter histories at four critical junctures, the first of which is fact collection.²¹³ By learning English to help translate the stories of Yezidi women for mass audiences, Adiba made sure the facts of the Yezidi genocide by ISIL were properly documented. In documenting this genocide Adiba resisted ISIL, and the governments that contributed to its rise to power, like the US and Iraq.

²¹⁰ Samira Shackle, "Yazidis in Iraq: 'The Genocide is Ongoing,'" *Al-Jazeera*, November 7, 2017, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/yazidis-iraq-genocide-ongoing-171105064140012.html>. It should be noted that Al-Jazeera is a newspaper funded by the Qatar government, which bears significant responsibility for ISIL's emergence as a proto-state, as it funded ISIL in the early years of the Syrian Civil War, 2011-13. Cockburn, *Islamic State*, 35-6.

²¹¹ Qasim, "Home."

²¹² Rebecca Holland, "What is it like to be a fixer in Iraq?" *Al-Jazeera*, August 14, 2017, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/fixer-iraq-170812114626640.html>.

²¹³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Power in the Story," in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Beacon Press: 1995) 26.

Adiba also confronted foreign reporters who asked insensitive questions, saying “sometimes [reporters] ask questions like, ‘How many times have you been raped, or have you been pregnant?’ I tell them you have to have respect.”²¹⁴ Through this work Adiba was resisting a different type of imperialism coming from the US, imperialism in the form of journalists who seek to profit off the suffering of black and brown women around the world. By demanding that the women being interviewed be treated with respect, Adiba was insisting that their lives held value beyond a potential news story. Unfortunately, Adiba had to leave Iraq for her safety in late 2017, though she has made a new life for herself in Switzerland, where she studies law and continues with her humanitarian work.²¹⁵

Adiba is not alone in resisting violence against Iraqi women from afar. Dunya Mikhail wrote a book to elevate the stories of Iraqi women resisting ISIL from a suburb of Detroit, Michigan. Dunya Mikhail is an Iraqi Christian woman who emigrated from Iraq in the 1990s because her journalistic work resulted in persecution by the Ba‘th regime.²¹⁶ Her book, *The Beekeeper*, gets its title from an Iraqi man, referred to only as Abdullah, a former beekeeper who put Mikhail in contact with the women she interviewed for this book. He also helped her translate Kurdish to Arabic. From her home in Michigan, Mikhail woke up before dawn to call Abdullah and discuss his work as a part of an organization that smuggled women kidnapped by ISIL to safety.²¹⁷ Mikhail did many phone interviews with Abdullah’s help, and in 2016 she travelled to Northern Iraq, where Abdullah lives and works, to meet with him and interview a few women in person.²¹⁸

²¹⁴ Holland, “Fixer.”

²¹⁵ Qasim, “Home.”

²¹⁶ Dunya Mikhail, *The Beekeeper: Rescuing the Stolen Women of Iraq*, trans. Dunya Mikhail and Max Weiss (New York: New Directions, 2018) author’s biography on back cover.

²¹⁷ Mikhail, *Beekeeper*, 39.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 177.

The women in *The Beekeeper* had a range of tactics to resist ISIL, including ways to make their time living under ISIL more bearable, and strategies used to coordinate an escape. Mikhail interviewed Badia, a Yezidi woman who was enslaved by ISIL for several months, about how Badia survived and escaped. Several of the tricks she adopted were to avoid being bought by ISIL fighters. Badia went a month without bathing.

They ordered us to bathe, but I went into the bathroom and came back out again without washing. I knew they were going to come and smell me, and cleanliness was dangerous in that situation. A month passed, and every day I began to smell worse. I didn't even wash my face despite the fact that my eyes were itching from crying so much.²¹⁹

To avoid being raped by the man who eventually enslaved her, nicknamed “the Emir,” Badia said that she was pregnant, which bought her at least a day until he could get a pregnancy test. She used that time to her advantage, and tried to escape:

When the Emir left in the morning, we had to figure out what to do about the guard. I told him: “We don't have any bread. We want to buy some.” He said: “I'll go get it for you,” and he left without locking the door. We made a run for it as soon as he had been gone for a few minutes. But moments later we wandered into a group of [ISIL fighters] on the street. They said: “Why aren't you dressed properly? Who are you with?”... They took us back to his house.²²⁰

When the Emir returned home, she told him that they weren't trying to escape, just getting some air, and that's why she hadn't been wearing the Islamic clothing prescribed by ISIL. Lies like this reduced the number of times Badia was beaten and raped by the Emir. Women like Badia, who were enslaved by ISIL, took every opportunity to reduce the amount of suffering they went through, whether it was to put off being sold or delay being raped. Given the horrific situation they were faced with, harm reduction and survival became a way to resist. With the help of

²¹⁹ Mikhail, *Beekeeper*, 66.

²²⁰ Ibid., 69.

Abdullah, Badia eventually escaped and shared her story with Mikhail, who shared Badia's strength with the world.

In terms of escaping ISIL, many women in *The Beekeeper* had a similar story because Abdullah and his network had a prescribed way of carrying out their rescue missions, but they offer insight into the ways Iraqi women escaped ISIL. Some called a relative who relayed their location to Abdullah and his team. Others, like Badia, memorized a number which was circulating among the Iraqi women who were detained together before being sold, and called it to set up their escape.²²¹ Stories such as Badia's in *The Beekeeper* show that Iraqi Yezidis escaped ISIL through sharing information that would help them escape.

Dunya Mikhail is known for her poetry collections, but *The Beekeeper* makes the voices of Iraqi women enslaved by ISIL easy to relate to and sympathize with. *The Beekeeper* blends Mikhail's life with the stories told to her by Abdullah and the women she interviews. Mikhail occasionally offers a stanza of poetry thematically connected to the narrative of an Iraqi woman who survived ISIL's abuse.²²² Rather than being narrated by Mikhail, the stories of women like Badia are told from the first-person perspective, which has the effect of bringing the reader closer to their stories. Through "I" statements, the reader is forced into the shoes of these women, however uncomfortable that may be. Mikhail also includes pictures of the women in the book, making them easier to identify with.

In addition, her effective literary style, Mikhail's translation of *the Beekeeper* into English brought the stories of Iraqi women to the global stage. By translating her book into English, Mikhail brought these stories to the world's most widely-spoken language, making them even more accessible. It also put the stories of Iraqi women into the language spoken by many of

²²¹ Mikhail, *Beekeeper*, 73-4.

²²² Ibid., 59. This entire chapter is tied together thematically by a line of her poetry.

the people responsible for creating ISIL who work or worked in the US government. *The Beekeeper* has been covered by media outlets like *PBS* and *The New Yorker*, both of whom brought in Mikhail for an interview.²²³ Mikhail's wonderful translation and the media coverage show that she was successful in bringing the stories of Iraqi women who survived life under ISIL to a large audience. While most of the women in *The Beekeeper* are Yezidi, ISIL's violence affected women of all sects and ethnicities (as I established above).

Interviews conducted by *Human Rights Watch* show that many Sunni women living in ISIL-occupied territory also had to escape rape and forced marriage by ISIL fighters. Unlike Yezidi women, they were not kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery. However, many Sunni women experienced sexual assault, especially if they were single, widowed, or their husbands fled to avoid being recruited. A woman under the pseudonym Hanan told HRW, "the same guy raped me every day for [a] month"²²⁴ until her father paid ISIL ransom money, 500 dollars and a car. She and her father then escaped to a refugee camp in Iraqi Kurdistan. Another woman, Miriam, said she "agreed, telling them to come the following day, and went into hiding that night." After three months Miriam was able to get past an ISIL checkpoint and resettled in Kirkuk.²²⁵ While HRW does not specify how Hanan or Miriam escaped, their report suggests that Iraqi women, regardless of sect, resisted ISIL through fleeing ISIL territory and by delaying rape and forced marriage through lies.

Other women resisted ISIL through acts like seeking healthcare despite gendered restrictions. As discussed above, ISIL destroyed many hospitals,²²⁶ and did not allow women to

²²³ Mythili Rao, "Dunya Mikhail on the Lives Stolen by ISIS," *The New Yorker Radio Hour*, May 11, 2018, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/tnyradiohour/segments/dunya-mikhail-lives-stolen-isis>; "This poet put the plight of Yazidi women into the world," *PBS NewsHour*, aired December 28, 2018, video, <https://www.pbs.org/video/this-poet-put-the-plight-of-the-yazidi-women-into-words-1545957793/>.

²²⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Sunni Women."

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ "Reaching women in Mosul," UN Population Fund.

be touched by or left alone with a male doctor.²²⁷ Rather than risk the three day wait to see a female doctor, women from Hawija told Human Rights Watch that they would use tricks to seek aid from a male doctor. One strategy was to find a doctor who would agree to examine them from across the room, or to have a male relative visit the doctor on their behalf, and describe their symptoms.²²⁸ None of their techniques were a replacement for proper healthcare, but by seeking some form of medical care despite ISIL's restrictions, Iraqi women asserted their needs and humanity, resisting ISIL's hyper-patriarchal rules.

Some Iraqi women had the opportunity to resist ISIL through armed resistance. In Iraqi Kurdistan, women have been fighting in the *Peshmerga*, or Kurdish military, since the 1960s, though not openly until the 1990s.²²⁹ Even then, Iraqi Kurdish women were usually assigned security duties, and rarely saw combat.²³⁰ However, this changed after ISIL formed, as units made up entirely of women began fighting against ISIL on the frontlines. Dilbreen, a 17-year-old Iraqi woman told a British reporter, "I joined the [*Peshmerga*] voluntarily... to help defend the Kurds, the Arabs, the Christians, and all [Iraqi] nationals."²³¹ Dilbreen's decision to volunteer for these reasons show that, despite the division encouraged by ISIL and the US occupation, there are still Iraqi women who identify and are willing to sacrifice their lives for Iraqis of other sects and ethnicities.

Other Iraqi Kurdish women said fighting ISIL was empowering. Berryton, a sniper in an all-women *Peshmerga* unit, was interviewed by Martin Himel, a white American man with *PBS*,

²²⁷ Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Women Suffer."

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Michael G. Lortz, "Willing to Face Death: A History of Kurdish Military Forces – The Peshmerga – from the Ottoman Empire to Present-Day Iraq" (Master of Arts thesis, Florida State University, 2005) 44; 64.

²³⁰ Hanar Marouf, "Peshmerga female fighters: From frontline to sideline," *The Washington Institute*, October 10, 2018, accessed April 16, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/peshmerga-female-fighters-from-frontline-to-sideline>.

²³¹ "Kurdish Women fighting ISIL on the frontline," *Euronews*, July 27, 2015, video, 0:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kkhrB9M7oY.

about why she fights. Berryton said, “when I fight against [ISIL], I feel stronger, empowered, because when they see women, they go weak at the knees. According to their belief, they must not be killed by a woman.”²³² She also says fighting against ISIL as a woman is inherently subversive: “even if you don’t kill them, you are fighting against their mentality.”²³³ Iraqi Kurdish women like Berryton were empowered by the fear they struck into ISIL fighters, and perhaps also by the fact that they were pushing new boundaries in Iraqi Kurdistan. After all, they were the first units made up exclusively of women to fight on the frontline. Through their armed resistance, women in Iraqi Kurdistan undermined ISIL’s worldview.

Conclusion

In the past decade, Iraqi women adapted their political activism and writing to resist ISIL’s violent extremism. In the North, Kurdish women took to militant resistance for the first time. And Iraqi women who faced the worst of ISIL’s violence found ways to survive and limit the amount of violence they endured. With this in mind, it is necessary to re-visit the present circumstances in Iraq and women’s place within them.

²³² Martin Himel, “How Kurdish women soldiers are confronting ISIS on the front lines,” *PBS NewsHour*, May 3, 2015, video, 3:38, accessed March 23, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvrHEpoedcU>.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 1:34.

Conclusion:

Making Sense of Past and Present

When I began writing this thesis over a year ago, I did not know that there would be an attempted revolution in the Fall of 2019. Almost a decade after the withdrawal of the US-led coalition army, Iraqi people organized en masse in a democratic uprising that challenged the ethnosectarianism and corruption of the post-2003 regime. As I conducted research on the past three decades, Iraqi women like Ban, mentioned in my introduction, were occupying Baghdad's Tahrir, or "Liberation," Square and demanding radical change. They were building on a long legacy of Iraqi women resisting imperialism, repression, and extremism. Ban said she was protesting political, tribal, and religious institutions that "limit women's role in society."²³⁴

The goal of this thesis has been, in many ways, to contextualize Ban's statement. In the years since 1990, Iraqi women have endured the violence of imperialism, repression, and extremism. I have argued that Iraqi women have resisted this violence through their survival, political mobilizations, writing, and more recently, through their militancy. During the dramatic transformations of the past three decades, from UN sanctions to ISIL, Iraqi women constantly adapted their resistance methods to work in the present moment.

The first major shift in Iraqi society took place in 1990 with the passage of UN sanctions, coupled Operation Desert Storm in 1991. These were devastating for Iraqi women because of their effects on the welfare state and civilian infrastructure, respectively. It became much harder for Iraqi women to find a job and receive quality healthcare. At the same time, Saddam Hussein's government instituted tribo-Islamic policies that empowered patriarchal tribal and religious leaders. In general, Iraqi women survived the economic collapse through their

²³⁴ "Nisā' Saḥat Taḥrīr."

participation in the informal economy, though what this looked like depended on one's class status. Women's political actions were limited by the Ba'th regime during this decade, but there is evidence that women took opportunities to attend state-approved protests against UN sanctions. A more common form of resistance was writing, be it poetry to ease one's soul, or prose intended to elevate the stories of other Iraqi women.

In 2003, the US invasion and military occupation of Iraq caused the collapse of the Iraqi state and a worsening of the economic crisis that began under sanctions. The US's use of "shock therapy" economics pushed more women out of the workforce than sanctions had, and the widespread violence followed by the state's collapse made it unsafe for many women to leave their homes. As the new government formed, Iraqi women were politically marginalized, and the new political elite made frequent attempts to strip women of their rights. Iraqi women continued to survive the economic collapse through their participation in the informal economy, and in this decade some women travelled to neighboring countries like Jordan, finding work as refugees. Within Iraq, the end of the one-party system meant Iraqi women could form non-governmental organizations for the first time, and many middle-class Iraqi women became activists. Also new to Iraqi women's resistance was the "blog" format, which was taken advantage of by women like Riverbend, who wrote to a US audience to inform them of the gendered impacts of the occupation.

In just over two years after the US's withdrawal, ISIL took control of almost a third of Iraq. It was able to do so in large part because of US imperialism and the post-2003 Iraqi regime. The chaotic aftermath of the 2003 invasion gave al-Qaeda the opportunity to establish itself, and in the early 2010s the corrupt and sectarian Iraqi government alienated Iraq's Sunni communities. ISIL took advantage of this to establish itself and turned on anyone who did not

adhere to its worldview. ISIL encouraged its fighters to rape and treat women like property, especially Yezidi women who were sold into sexual slavery. Much like the US before it, ISIL destroyed hospitals and left Iraqi women without many essential services. Iraqi women survived and resisted ISIL through finding ways to reduce the violence against them until they could escape. They also adapted strategies like political activism and writing to aid and elevate the stories of ISIL's victims. Finally, A new form of resistance appeared in the Kurdish *Peshmerga* with the establishment of all-women regiments that fought against ISIL on the frontlines.

Today, many of Iraqi women's biggest challenges remain the same. In January 2020, amid the uprisings, the US assassinated a top Iranian military officer on Iraqi soil. This act of imperialism created sectarian tensions among the formerly unified protests.²³⁵ While dedicated protesters continue to occupy Tahrir square, the uprisings have been effectively suspended by the COVID-19 pandemic. The corrupt Iraqi political elite maintain their hold on power, and militias continue to threaten and kill Iraqi women activists.²³⁶ While ISIL has lost all of its territory in Iraq and Syria, it continues to operate underground, and has called for its followers to carry out more attacks during the pandemic.²³⁷ Moreover, the pandemic and the plummeting price of oil, which provide the Iraqi government with 90% of its revenue, are creating another economic crisis. This time, COVID-19 and social distancing mean the informal economy may not be a viable option for Iraqi women.²³⁸ It is unclear what the future holds for Iraqi women, but if

²³⁵ David Rising. "Iran uses violence, politics to push US out of Iraq," *Associated Press*, January 23, 2020, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://apnews.com/6a6cfd35f314242e616d95ea6c012ba>.

²³⁶ Shelly Kittleson, "Coronavirus curfew fails to clear Iraq protest squares," *al-Monitor*, April 6, 2020, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/iraq-coronavirus-covid-19-protesters.html>.

²³⁷ Cara Anna, "Extremists see global chaos from virus as an opportunity," *Associated Press*, April 2, 2020, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://apnews.com/003e493d970a08202ab36565324aab64>.

²³⁸ Alissa J. Rubin, "Oil Prices Crash, Virus Hits, Commerce Stops: Iraq Is in Trouble," March 29, 2020, accessed April 17, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/29/world/middleeast/virus-iraq-oil.html>.

history is any indicator, Iraqi women will find ways to adapt their survival tactics and resistance methods to the violence and challenges of 2020 and beyond.

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